Context:

Southeast Asians in California
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Folsom Cordova Unified School District
2460 Cordova Lane,
Rancho Cordova CA 95670
(916) 635-6815
Judy Lewis, Editor

Songs of the New Year

Refugee Educators' Network meetings:

September 17

November 19

January 21

February 18

May 20

9:00 to 11:30
Southeast Asia Community Resource Center,
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9th annual

Southeast Asia Education Faire

March 20, 1993

$40.00


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In the park are two to three thousand Hmong, but clustered near the public address speakers is a densely packed crowd of two hundred or so men, women, and children. Several people are holding "boom boxes" and other kinds of tape recorders shoulder height, aimed towards the center of the crowd. People look serious, gazing at the ground, looking around, once in a while talking to one other, but all are standing relatively still. The November wind cuts through the jackets and blue plaid head scarves, and lifts the glittery plastic trims on Yee Her's jacket away from the fabric, so they twirl and dance on the beaded anchor strings. The silver coins, also tied to the costume by threads, are unaffected by the wind, but jingle as she moves towards the picnic table bench. She stands up on the bench, holding a microphone in her right hand and a folded flowery umbrella and the microphone cord in her left. Her face is incredibly smooth and pink from the chill, her eyes shy and unsure where to rest, her

mouth occasionally smiling slightly as the announcer describes her talent at composing and performing *kwv txhiaj*. Her mother, blue scarf tied around her head in a style favored by the older Hmong women and wearing an old corduroy car coat over her new blue blouse, stands near the young girl giving words of advice while the announcer talks. Yee Her, the young girl, doesn't visibly acknowledge her mother's words, and appears to be fighting nervousness.

Yee Her's Hmong dress is different from the White Hmong dress depicted in photographs taken in her native Laos twenty years ago. Black velveteen, roses of silver metallic threads woven in, has been used in place of plain black homespun for the jacket, pants, and apron. The blue trim is still in the appropriate places on the costume, banding the edges: cuffs on the sleeves, front edges of the jacket and edges of the aprons. The center of the aprons are embroidered with cross-stitch (in the past, the centers were plain), and decorated with the glittery round disks; this same decoration is applied to her jacket. The back of her jacket has a rectangular piece attached at the neck, rather like a small-sized sailor collar. The rectangular piece is finely worked with cut-and-reverse applique and embroidery, surrounded by narrow strips of colored fabric layered one on top of the other. The pattern of the collar piece is geometric, the white space inside the banded frame is cut in a regular way by triangles, squares, sprials, and diagonals. The attaching stitches are all but invisible, and embroidered designs are stitched in the spaces created by the intersecting pieces. The white background is dominated by neon-pink, lime-green, and fluorescent yellow. Although some other women in colorful skirts wear the rectangular collar piece face down, Yee Her wears hers face up. Layers and layers of sashes and coin bags wrapped around her midsection repeat the needlework techniques used on the collar piece, and hundreds of silver coins dangle and jingle from the sashes and bags. Each of the pieces is banded with two or more strips of fabric, framing the center design. Around her neck is a silver neck ring, two hollow tubes collaring her face. Down her back, nearly to her waist, hang chains of silver, to which engraved medallions of many shapes are attached. One story—probably apocrophal—is that this piece of jewelry evolved from the iron neck shackles with which the Chinese held Hmong captive, rather like handcuffs for the neck. On closer inspection, the medallions' engraved pattern mimics the design on the collar piece: frames within frames, and in the center a geometric or flowery design. Yee Her's head dress looks much like those in the old pictures; a black cloth is wrapped around her hair, concealing all of it. The ends of the head-wrap are embroidered with cross-stitch, and bright yarn pom-poms are attached so that the back of her head is a cluster of flowery colors. Around the black turban is tied a black-and-white checkered ribbon. She wears pale lipstick and real gold earrings, but no other face decoration. Her age is difficult to determine; she has the height of a fully grown woman, her body's shape is well-concealed under layers of clothing, her demeanor is that of a young girl of early adolescence, but she handles the microphone and task at hand with surprising calm poise.

The task at hand is to perform her sung poetry for the crowd; the powerful speakers carry sound to the far reaches of the park, to the ears of the thousands of Hmong gathered there to mark the coming of their new year. Her sounds are not like songs in the Western sense, as there are only five or so notes, and a slow chanting cadence. Some syllables are stretched long and thin, and others are cut off abruptly, swallowed suddenly. Certain syllables are repeated at fairly regular intervals, signposts along the aural road. From the attitude of intense concentration, she's mentally involved in a strenuous task. She sings for about five minutes, then

steps down from the park bench and stands in the crowd.

Taking her place in the center of the crowd, but not up on the picnic bench, is a Hmong man, many years her senior, also holding a microphone. He sings, and the structure is similar to hers (long sustained "ni yai" followed by chanting, and ending with an abruptly cut off "ey" or "o".) Those in the crowd don't look at him, nor do they appear very interested, but they stand still in the wind and look at nothing; every once in a while they laugh and nod, and the singer smiles while continuing. Yee Her's mother tries to enfold her in the car coat, standing just behind her. Yee Her listens to the man's singing.

After the man's turn ends, she returns to the bench to begin again. They take turns like this several times, and the entire set lasts thirty or forty minutes. One such exchange goes like this:

(The man sings)

Nij.....yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee....
tam tseeb ni nkauj-hmoob, sim me neej no
es kheev lam muaj txoj hmoov;
lub ntuj txawj qees lub teb txawj qaws
es yuav qaws tau me nkauj-hmoob ces
txiv-tub muab koj phim tau li lub nkoj teeb;
sim neej no tawm rooj plaws lub teb lub chaws
tus hlob tus yau los xyuas,
yuav zoo puav tam li Suav-tuam-los-pav ua luam yeeb.

teeb & **yeeb** rhyme

[Ni.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....
goodness oh Hmong girl, in my life-time
if it's possible that I have good fortune;
if heaven selects you, if earth chooses you,
then you are meant to be my girl-friend.
I would dress you special, like a boat bobbing on the water;
when we go out, everyone in the world,
the old and the young, would notice us,
like the Chinese merchant coming to trade opium.]

teeb & **co** are semantically related (ways that a boat moves on the water)

Nij.....yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee.....
tam tseeb ni nkauj-hmoob, sim me neej no
es kheev lam muaj txoj hmoov;
lub ntuj txawj qees lub teb txawj qaws
es yuav qaws tau me nkauj-hmoob ces
txiv-tub muab koj phim tau li lub nkoj co;
sim neej no tawm rooj plaws lub teb lub chaws
tus hlob tus yau los xyuas,
yuav zoo puav tam li Suav-tuam-los-pav ua luam pob-txha-tsov.

co & **tsov** rhyme

[Ni.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....
goodness oh Hmong girl, in my life-time
if it's possible that I have good fortune;
if heaven selects you, if earth chooses you,
then you are meant to be my girl-friend.
I would dress you special like a boat bouncing in the water;
when we go out, everyone in the world,
the old and the young, would notice us,
like the Chinese merchant coming to trade tiger-bone.]

yeeb & **tsov** are semantically related (things that a Chinese trader comes to a village to get)

These verses are created extemporaneously to fit what the other person says—throwing verses back and forth.

Listeners are alert for the rhyming words and semantic twists, all within a context that fits the situation, often full of flirtatious hidden meanings.

More complex verses would have more than one pair of rhymes, more than one semantic twist. Very clever singers might manipulate several "words that match" with very few filler thoughts in between.

What kinds of memorization strategies could a teacher use with Hmong students that would build upon this familiar pattern of oral expression? (Iu-Mien, Khmu—and probably other Southeast Asian groups—have similar forms of verse exchanges.)

(The girl responds)

Nij.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis.....txiv-tub
koj niam thiab koj txiv noj tag tsav yam nuj tus dab-tsi los yug koj
es yuav yug tau koj tus me ntiv-tes ntiv-taw yiag quj-qaim
es yuav ntxim tag koj niam koj txiv ntiv nplhaib kub;
Nij...yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis.....txiv-tub
koj niam thiab koj txiv noj tag tsav yam nuj tus dab-tsi los yug koj
es yuav yug tau koj tus muaj lub paj-plhu mos nyuj-nyoos yuav tawb neeg hlub.

kub & **hlub** rhyme

[Ni....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....Hmong boy,
what kinds of food did your parents eat to produce you,
and raise you to have fingers and toes perfectly straight,
worthy of your parents' ring of gold;
Ni.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii....Hmong boy,
what kinds of food did your parents eat to produce you,
and raise you to have a gentle flower-face to attract people to love you?]

kub & **nyiag** are semantically related (two kinds of precious metal)

Nij.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis.....txiv-tub
koj niam thiab koj txiv noj tag tsav yam nuj tus dab-tsi los yug koj
es yuav yug tau koj tus me ntiv-tes ntiv-taw yiag quj-qaim
es yuav ntxim tag koj niam koj txiv ntiv-nplhaib nyiag.
Nij.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis.....txiv-tub
koj niam thiab koj txiv noj tag tsav yam nuj tus dab-tsi los yug koj
es yuav yug tau koj tus muaj lub paj-plhu mos nyuj-nyoos tawb neeg nyiam.

nyiag & **nyiam** rhyme

Ni....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.....Hmong boy,
what kinds of food did your parents eat to produce you,
and raise you to have beautiful fingers and toes,
worthy of your parents' ring of silver;
Ni.....yaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii....Hmong boy,
what kinds of food did your parents eat to produce you,
and raise you to have a gentle flower-face to attract people to like you?]

hlub & **nyiam** are semantically related (near synonyms, 'love/care for'; 'like/love')

These two perform for the crowds what was traditionally sung privately, between a young boy and girl, testing each other's knowledge and quick wit. While composing and singing *kwv txhiaj sib tw* (sung poetry challenge) the girls catch tennis balls in their right hands, throwing them back underhanded to the boys facing them. When asked, Hmong respond that *pov pob* (tossing the ball) allows shy youth to face each other; the throwing and catching keeps them within communicating distance long enough to get to know one another. The songs, along with the stitchery (formerly the product of the girls' diligence and creativity), were ways to judge other less obvious qualities of a girl—how hard-working she might be, how well she knows the "patterns" of life, how clever and alert her mind is, and how well she attracts the admiration and notice of others. The ways in which the girl answers the boy's verses tell him whether or not she is interested in him, and vice-versa. The mothers and fathers watch the potential sons-in-law and daughters-in-law with as much interest as the participants themselves.

Now that the Hmong no longer live in isolated villages, coming to meet people from other villages during the annual break in the work cycle, there is less need for these customs that allow people to quickly get to know one another. Young Hmong now freely intermix in American communities and schools, however, traveling to meet one another during the weekends of November and December is still high on everyone's list of priorities. A common element of the activities appears to be demonstrating to others what one has accomplished, what one can do, how much has been accumulated during the year.

[by Judy Lewis, Hmong New Year, Rancho Cordova, 1984]

Taken from page 35 of Anthony Chan's ***Hmong Textile Design*** (Owings Mills, Maryland: Stemmer House, Inc., 1990)

1. What are these Hmong doing? What time of year is it?
2. What dialect groups are depicted here? From which regions of Laos?
3. What is the significance of the umbrella?
4. Where are the two boys escorting the girl? What's going on?
5. Which customs/behaviors are compatible with US life? Which are not?

Attribution Retraining

A Vietnamese friend once told me that parents understand that some children are brighter than others, but it doesn't really matter. The slower ones just have to sleep an hour or two less and study more. Effort is all.

There is research to support this idea. Studies of *achievement motivation*—the tendency to display initiative and persistence when faced with challenging tasks—suggest that experience teaches children how to explain why some succeed and others fail. By the age of three, children are able to think about why they have succeeded or failed at a task, and this experience, along with adult feedback, leads to expectancies of success.

Five-year old children, in comparison to older school children, will repeatedly attempt a task despite repeated failure (Rholes et al., 1980). When asked, young children respond that a unsuccessful peer will eventually be successful if he keeps trying, and in fact, they believe that a smart person is the one that expends more effort (Nicholls, 1978). Preschoolers and early elementary children are "learning optimists" (Dweck & Elliott, 1983).

During middle childhood, children are able to reason in more complex ways, and can separate ability and effort when explaining success and failure. Children who attribute failure to factors in the environment that can be changed or controlled maintain their earlier optimism in the face of challenge (Nicholls, 1976). Other children learn to be helpless (Dweck & Elliott, 1983; Dweck et al., 1986: "learned helplessness"); they attribute their failures to their low ability and their lack of power to affect it (Diener & Dweck, 1978; 1980). This comes about because children compare their performance with peers, but also because of the kinds of feedback they receive from adults. One study linked parents' beliefs that their children were less able and had to work harder to succeed to low expectancies of success among their children, even when their performance in mathematics was equivalent to their peers (Parsons, Adler, Kaczala, 1982).

Achievement motivation is malleable up to the age of adolescence (Harari & Covington, 1981). Changing the ways in which children attribute success is called *attribution retraining*. The basic idea is to identify low-achievers and those with learned helplessness, and help them view failure as surmountable if extra effort is exerted. The most direct route is to present children with moderately challenging tasks, and when failure occurs to provide them with repeated feedback from an adult that helps them revise their attributions, for example, "You can do it if you try harder" (Dweck, 1975). Adults can also interpret successes by pointing out the role of effort (controllable) rather than luck (uncontrollable), for example, "You did it" or "You really tried hard on that one" or "I see you got the right answer" (Chapin & Dyck, 1976; Fowler & Peterson, 1981; Medway & Venino, 1982; Schunk, 1983). Another helpful technique is to expose low-achieving student to models who demonstrate self-effort statements, such as "I tried hard and found out I could do it", and persistence in the face of obstacles, "I'll get it next time" (Cecil & Medway, 1986; Schunk, 1981; Schunk, Hanson & Cox, 1987). Once children replace learned helplessness with mastery-oriented attributions, they gain an incremental view of their ability—even if ability is low to begin with, it can be improved by trying hard.

Recently, high school math teacher Bob Cragun pointed out that an American proverb says "the early bird gets the worm", but in another culture, it might read "the slow bird gets up earlier". My Vietnamese mentor would agree.

There are unbelievable deals in the books stores—college texts with 1988, 1990 copyright dates for as little as $5.98. Finding concise summaries of related research and relevant bibliographies makes quick work of keeping current.

Check Book Warehouse at the outlet chains, Waldenbooks, Books Inc.

Child Development, Sociology, and Psychology introductory texts all have sections related to learning, success and failure, language acquisition, intergroup relations, and other topics.

Cecil, M.A., & Medway, F.J. (1986). "Attribution Retraining with Low-Achieving and Learned Helplessness Children." *Techniques: A Journal for Remedial Education and Counseling* 2: 173-181.
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