

Writing a New World Into Being: Orthographic Ideology and Millenarian Religion in Hmong Society



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Waves of Hmong migration from Southwest China to Southeast Asia is commonly made meaningful through ritual understandings encoded in *zaj tshoob*, *zaj taw kev*, *zaj qeej ntaus Suav* and *zaj txiv xaiv foom kom lus Suav*. Ritual narratives describe the fall of the ancient Hmong kingdom thousands of years ago, after which Hmong fled south under the threat of Chinese empire. In addition to the ways that ‘traditional’ ritual (*‘kev cai qub’*) makes sense of this history, a variety of Hmong millenarian groups have also proliferated in Hmong communities around the world. Among the ‘new’ ritual practices propagated by these groups, various efforts to establish and disseminate new writing systems stands out as particularly important. In this paper, I argue that the same Hmong language ideology that helps understand the communicative capacities of the *qeej* and other ‘traditional’ ritual practices also helps us understand why writing systems are so important to these new religious movements. These movements explicitly seek to restore Hmong society to the former greatness that was lost since the ancient Hmong kingdom fell thousands of years ago. For some, the ultimate goal is nothing short of restoring the ancient Hmong kingdom. Establishing a universal and authentic Hmong orthography is imagined as a key component to this restoration. The concept of ‘orthographic ideology’ is meant to unpack the logic of how a standardized writing system is supposed to accomplish this task in a Hmong millenarian imagination.

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Via Zoom from the University of Wisconsin-Madison**

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