

AUDIO TAPE LOG FORM

Interviewer's tape no(s):

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Interview:

Date: June 29, 2006

Place: Chippewa Valley Museum library

Other people present: one unidentified man doing photo research

Background noise: minimal ambient sound

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Tape used: (brand/length, no. and portion of tape(s) used:
One Memorex DBS normal bias 90 minute cassette tape, most of Side A

Recording engineer: Leary

Summary description of tape contents:

The session consists of an update regarding Joua's experience with Hmong musical practices and funerals since he was last interviewed for the CVM in 1991.

Narrator: Joua Bee Xiong
Interviewer: Jim Leary
Date: June 29, 2006
Location: Chippewa Valley Museum
Duration: 372
Project: Arrivals Folk Arts

LEARY: With the traditional music you have performed what has happened with your own experience, or your family, or the people around you over the last fourteen, fifteen years?

XIONG: Well I see that there's nothing much changed. People still practice the qeej, at the funerals. I see that a few families became Christian families, but not many. So we still have about seventy five percent of the Hmong community in Eau Claire here that they still believe the old traditional way. And then when someone passes away, we still do the funerals. Play the qeej, the drum. We don't have many new kids want to learn that, because it's very difficult. I would say my two boys, when they're growing bigger they're more interested into the western music. They're playing guitar right now, and pianos. But not much of the qeej anymore. So it's kind of I don't want them turning that way, their generation, that they want to be that way. I think it's okay. I see three or four Hmong kids in town that they still continue to do that [i.e. play the qeej] and they're very successful.

LEARY: So who are the people who playing the qeej nowadays?

XIONG: I think that a few of the Hmong kids, their last name is same as mine, I can consider as my nephews—they're playing. And my nephew that I taught, he's still playing at the funerals. And those young generations, three or four that I'm talking about, they're still playing. When there's a funeral, they come to the funeral home, they practice, and I encourage them to continue to do that.

LEARY: What is your nephew's name that still plays?

XIONG: Ger Xiong. He tells people to pronounce his name Ger but I would say Ger [as in "yrrr"] Xiong. And then the other kids, I know the family, the father and mother. They are Bao Xiong, he has three kids and they're still playing. Besides me there are other qeej masters that they have more time, so they taught those kids. And they're still playing.

LEARY: Can you tell me a little bit about the work you've done in teaching people to play for the funeral?

XIONG: I taught some of those kids, pretty much on the dancing part, because I don't have much time. And I'm very good at the dance part. So I taught them how to do that. But not learning the melodies and the songs and all that, because I don't have much time and I don't commit to tell them that. But other than that, they're still playing and learning those melodies from the older master. If they say, "I want to learn how to dance," then they're referred to me and I taught them how to do that.

LEARY: Are the older masters in Eau Claire?

XIONG: One in Eau Claire, one in Menomonie. One is Bee Xiong and one is Cher Xiong.

LEARY: Is there a certain funeral home that Hmong use or own?

XIONG: We don't own any funeral [home], but we use Evergreen Funeral. I would say ninety-nine percent that we use them, because he knows the Hmong culture and he encourages people to be there and to be comfortable. So Evergreen Funerals is the one that they go.

LEARY: Are you able then to have only the one body there during the funeral?

XIONG: Certainly, for now, I haven't seen two bodies there yet. I think it is very fortunate that we don't have two people pass away at the same time. But in the past, probably the past six years, when the funeral first opened and then we have people die within two weeks. Two people die within two weeks. And we've been doing that for three years—when someone pass away, then the other pass away within two weeks—and at that time I was the director of the Hmong Association and the community approached me. They said, "Joe, we need to do something to break the cycle of dying, two people within two weeks." And then that had been for three or three and a half years. Then I said, "Sure, we can do that." Then I call a shaman, came to the Hmong Association, and then on behalf of the community we had the shaman diagnose us and perform and break the cycle of dying—two persons within two weeks. We did that and since that we've had one person die at a time. When someone pass away, then one person. At Twin Cities, because of the number of the people, they probably have about 75,000 people there. They had two funerals [funeral homes] and right now they have four funerals [funeral homes]. And then even though four funerals, they still kind of waiting at the funerals too. And one funeral they have two sessions, and they can have the funeral services at the same day. I saw it happen, but that is not normal practices. But when we came to this country, we heard the funerals [funeral homes], it's for everybody. But in your own house, even though you had two persons die at a time—example, like a car accident—you cannot have the service at the same time. You need to wait until you bury this person and then put the other in. And then have service for the next person.

LEARY: I know the last time I talked to you, it was difficult for the funeral home because if someone who wasn't Hmong died, and their body was there and you wanted to have the Hmong person it is difficult for the spirit...

XIONG: The family have a hard time to accept that. We haven't had any experience in Eau Claire here yet. Each time that the funeral, have no other services.

LEARY: In the past funerals used to be several days are they..?

XIONG: In the past, in Laos, I would say several days to a week, but here in Eau Claire or in the United States, pretty much people have the service from Friday—either Friday morning or Friday evening—up to Monday morning or Monday noon. And the body has to be buried on Monday. So I think people always practice that way because people are working and you need people to be there to help you. So I would say Friday, and then bury on Monday.

LEARY: Do people ever photograph or video tape at a funeral, or is that something that disturbs the spirit?

XIONG: No, people always videotape or take a picture for memories, so that wouldn't disturb the spirit.

LEARY: If some people from the museum would like to make some photographs of a funeral here in Eau Claire would that, we'd have to ask the funeral director and the family of course...

XIONG: That should be no problem. If they want things to be recorded, we can make arrangements. When things happen in Eau Claire, then I can give the museum a call and they can come. I can help them make that happen.

LEARY: Can you tell me about this band and tell me what's become of it?

XIONG: Well I still have the drums here and the guitar [Neng Xiong, I think] and the other bass [Seng Xiong] here in Eau Claire. They're still in Eau Claire, but the rest—two or three in Twin Cities, and one in Arkansas right now. They kind of out there, but they haven't played for quite a few years now. But since my brother has married her and then she also is a singer. So whenever I have some occasion, then I can invite them to come and sing. Or we can get together, just to play, too. And then the band that, the new band that I start, is myself, my two nephews [Ger Xiong and Kong Xiong], and then one of my grandnephews.[Ger's son]. I play a little bit. I sing for them too.

LEARY: Do you play an instrument in that band?

XIONG: Not play an instrument, I just be there to support them and then I'm one of the singers. Mostly supporting them, and I sing the oldest songs, like country song and slow song. The younger, they like to play the rock and the fast music. But whatever, depending on what occasion we play at—if we have more older people, who are important people, then they ask me to sing. But if we have the young generation there most of the time, they sing younger songs, then I just play some of the music and help them.

LEARY: So do they sing in Hmong

XIONG: Some in Hmong and some in English.

LEARY: So who are the players, what are their names?

XIONG: My nephew Ger Xiong and one is Kong Xiong, then the other is Ger's son. Can't remember his name.

LEARY; And what instrubments do they have in the band?

XIONG: Guitar, piano, drums, and then a thing to make jingles.

LEARY: A tambourine maybe?

XIONG: And sometime I play my flute with the band too.

LEARY: Do you do any songs about the experience being Hmong in America?

XIONG: Quite a few. We write a new song, my nephew, he wrote a new song about how difficult to be orphan boys, an immigrant's song, and then experience with the new country. And he wrote all those too.

LEARY: Are there any recordings made of those?

XIONG: Oh yes, he [Kong Xiong] has one by himself. He wrote all those songs. He make the music by himself too.

LEARY: Is there a place I can buy one of those?

XIONG: Sure, I will give him a call.

LEARY: Back to this band, one time when you were in Madison I mentioned that I played, I think it was this second song, I played it because I really like it, the sound, and I think you told me it was a song about...

XIONG: Conflict of religion.

LEARY: Yes, a young man or a young woman, one was Christian, one was traditional.

XIONG: Yes, and there was a conflict because the younger generation they like each other, but the parents dislike because of the religions. And then he wrote the song about that, and he experienced about that too—so he wrote it, something about his experience.

LEARY: Is this the same one who composes the new songs now?

XIONG: No this is a different one.

LEARY: And what is his name?

XIONG: This guy, Nick, the one who married ["Stacey"]. And that time our band name is Xiong V. . . [sp?, pronounced "vee"] Z . . . [sp?, pronounced "zheng"], but right now the band that we have is Xiong Pride.

LEARY: Are some of the other songs about being in America?

XIONG: [Pause] No. But I can ask my nephew to see if he has.

LEARY: What about some of her songs, do you know what they're about?

XIONG: Pretty much love songs.

LEARY: Are any of them traditional or are any of them new...?

XIONG: Those are the modern songs, played with guitar and music. Most of the traditional *kwvtxhiaj* or the Hmong folksongs are sung a lot in America, but no on this. This guy, recently he got stroke and he's paralyzed. Xiong, hasn't had any kids yet.

LEARY: Here in the Eau Claire area, when she played or you played with your relatives, what place do you perform at?

XIONG: We went someplace like the Lake Hallie Town Hall, the Labor Temple. And then we play at the Moose Lodge. Sometimes we play, occasionally, graduation, New Year's, some occasion when the people want to make fundraising.

LEARY: Do you travel much?

XIONG: Pretty much locally. Last year we play out at the Cities, we play in Wisconsin Rapids for the Hmong United Refugees conference. We played in Wisconsin Rapids, because they have their conference down there. So we play it for them. They have seventeen Hmong organizations in Wisconsin that they have a conference and we play for them.

LEARY: When you play here in Eau Claire where does your audience come from?

XIONG: Well pretty much we have local, Twin Cities. Last time that we played was June third for my parents' retirement party. And I asked all my brothers and then sisters and cousins and relatives here. And then we play. We have my brothers from Arkansas, from Twin Cities, from Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton. But most of the time, when we play, I would say that, because Twin Cities is closer we have the audience from Twin Cities more than anyplace else. And we do have the surrounding communities, like Wausau, Menomonie, LaCrosse, Madison, and Twin Cities.

LEARY: Do you advertise then? So people know you're playing.

XIONG: Sometimes we do. If we do a fund raiser, then we do. But if we don't do a fund raiser, and we play for somebody, then they do, saying that they have a ceremony for this or maybe for their parents, then they advertise. We don't. But if we do it for ourselves, then yes we do.

LEARY: So where do you put your ads?

XIONG: We send it to the non-profit organizations, maybe put our ad to the grocery store, and the place that people can see. And sometimes when we go to the festival that they have, we give the fliers to the vendors, or maybe we can them on the windshields at the parking lot.

LEARY: I think the museum would like, if you have some copies of some of those flyers would be pretty good.

XIONG: I still have agendas and the brochure for the last time that we played. Maybe I can pull that out for you.

LEARY: In Madison there's a Hmong radio, not a station but a program, maybe once a week, is there anything around?

XIONG: Yes they do. Everyday.

LEARY: What station?

XIONG: I can't remember. It's 93.3 or something like that. In Eau Claire.

LEARY: So do musicians perform live on that?

XIONG: No. Pretty much news, music, folksongs. I recently got a request from an old lady that she wanted to hear old folksongs more than more modern songs. I said, well, give the staff a call and then I can suggest that to them. But if you have a song that you want to hear, then you can provide it to them and they can play. I told her that. They do it from seven to eight, Monday through Friday.

LEARY: Seven to eight at night?

XIONG: Yes. Monday through Saturday, I think. News and those songs, music, local and nation and also international news.

Leary: 93.1 FM?

XIONG: Point one or point three, I am not really sure.

LEARY: Can you still play the instruments and all that after [your stroke]?

XIONG: I'm still playing. Qeej. Quite a few times. I think the people in the Twin Cities asked me to be there and play twice at the library, and also at a community close to Iowa. And I'm still playing at the conference. Not very much, but I'm still trying to play.

LEARY: Maybe not doing so much

XIONG: Maybe not, good thing that I still remember most of the songs. I still be able to communicate, so that's good. But the whole part of my right side here is kind of numbness, tingling, and pain.

LEARY: I had a friend who had that, and when he walks he can't feel if his foot is touching the sidewalk, have you had the shaman?

XIONG: I've tried most everything. Medication, the doctor keeps changing, like seven, eight different kinds of medication to help my pain. He said, "Joe, there's nothing wrong with your body, it's from your brain." Right now they refer me to a psychiatrist. They ask those people to help me. I told them the depression, the stress is not from something else, it's from the illness that I have. If I get better, I can cope with my stress. But the reason that I have stress and sickness and quite a few emotions is my pain. I'm not a person who just sits at home doing nothing. Right now my capabilities pull me down. So I got lots of stress. I try everything. I try massage, Thai massage, Chinese massage, acupuncture, herbs, medication, shamans. Anything I can. And nothing is helping this side at all. Then I got heart attack three times. The doctor told me that my heart is like eighty years old people already. I couldn't believe that, because I'm really active: playing music, play soccer, volleyball, hunter. Very active in the community. So I'm

not sure. But I'm coping with stress very well. I've been through many difficult things. But I don't understand why I'm that old.

LEARY: Let me ask a little more about the funerals, last time I interviewed you some of the songs had to do with going out by horse going back to the place you came from, now they changing to a plane because of the ocean, are there other kinds of changes that have come about in some of the funeral songs recently?

XIONG: No. Pretty much, with the traditional songs, you cannot change that. You always stay with what was originally. But some of those new songs that I wrote, or somebody wrote, that is not the most important song—what we call it is the song that you can play during the day to make people not so bored—those songs I can write or people can play or can write a new song. But the song that invite the spirit for lunch and dinner, the reincarnation song, or the song of guiding the soul or the spirit to the ancestor's country, and the song of like you give the life of the animals to the spirit or the clothing or something that you want to dedicate to the spirit, those we cannot create. Those have to stay with the original.

LEARY: That makes sense, I want to ask just a little about, I come from Rice Lake, actually one of my old friends was killed during that deer hunting tragedy, and I know you've been hunting for years and have had some difficulty with people threatening you, what is the situation now, do you think, with Hmong people hunting, is it still a source of stress and tension?

XIONG: Yeah, I think you may have read some of those comments that I made during the time, or a little bit after that. I had difficulty dealing with those too, suddenly then I have a stroke and a heart attack. I think that it's probably part of it too. Thank God that nothing happened last season. I'm very happy with that. I think people are cautious and be careful and make sure things don't happen. Since I had my illness I don't go hunt much. My brother took me to some private property that he got permission. We went there a couple times. Then turkey hunting I hunt at my land. That's pretty much it. But last year or last season, I got lots of people call and complain, but no actions happened. So that's very good. That must be a miracle. You know, people call me. They said, should I do this or do that? They should have more bullets and weapons and all this. I keep telling them that those would not solve the problems. The only thing that solves the problems, reduce the tensions, let the time help it too. And, individual, you have to understand that only individuals have the problems, it's not everybody's. We shouldn't think that way. Stay alert, but don't think that every time you go hunting that will happen to you.

LEARY: Since I grew up in that community and there were many many good people, but I have heard lots of racist comments over the years about American Indians, black people, Hmong people, including from some of those families involved in that hunting and going back thirty years...

XIONG: I also heard comments from the neighborhood. From people who told me stories about the families too, but I think that I can understand from both sides, at the time. And you don't be there, you don't see what actually happened. So it doesn't matter make perceptions, they don't know what's going on at that time and why it happened. So people still have questions in their minds.

LEARY: Maybe that's enough for this session.