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# Children's Books as Cultural Products: A Qualitative Study of Cultural Representation in Hmong and Non-Hmong American Books

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS CULTURAL PRODUCTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN HMONG AND NON-HMONG AMERICAN  
BOOKS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Psychology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfilment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Malina Her

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS CULTURAL PRODUCTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF  
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BOOKS

by

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August 2019

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## ABSTRACT

### CHILDREN'S BOOKS AS CULTURAL PRODUCTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN HMONG AND NON-HMONG AMERICAN BOOKS

by Malina Her

This study examined the type of cultural practices and values depicted within Hmong American children's books in comparison to non-Hmong American children's books from the United States. The purpose was to explore if prior Hmong traditional practices and values reflective of American individualism would extend to Hmong children's books. Thirty best-seller children's books were coded using two checklists, one focused on Hmong traditional practices and the other on American values. Results showed that Hmong traditional practices underscored by Hmong adolescents in prior research somewhat extended to Hmong children's books. Moreover, in some respects Hmong children's books displayed similar numbers of American values as did American children's books. This study expanded the ethnic-racial socialization literature to an understudied population, the Hmong. In addition, the study provides parents and public educators insights into the cultural practices and values presented within Hmong children's books.

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## **Introduction**

Immigrants and ethnic minorities often face the challenge of finding a balance between the cultural values of their ethnic heritage and those of their host country, such that it can become difficult to tease apart one's ethnic identity from the American identity (Tikhonov, Espinosa, Huynh, & Anglin, 2019). According to the 2010 Census, Asian Americans were the fastest growing ethnic-racial group in the United States (U.S.) between 2000 and 2010 (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim & Shahid, 2012). Yet despite the U.S. being a multiethnic country, many ethnic minorities are often overlooked by researchers and grouped under pan-ethnic labels such as Asian or Asian American (Kiang, Tseng, & Yip, 2016). Research on ethnic identity development within the Asian American literature has included primarily East Asians such as the Chinese or Japanese (Cheung, Monroy, & Delany, 2017; Yoon et al., 2017). Using umbrella terms like Asian or Asian American disregards within-group differences and creates the misconception that existing research within the Asian American cultural literature is generalizable to all subgroups.

### **The Hmong Population in the U.S.**

Among the Asian subgroups, the Hmong American population has shown remarkable growth (Hoeffel & Jones, 2012). Fleeing ethnic persecution after the Vietnam War, many settled as political refugees throughout the U.S., with high concentrations in Wisconsin and California (Lor, 2009). There are roughly 280,000 Hmong people in the U.S. today (Lamborn & Moua, 2008; Moua & Vang, 2015; Ying & Han, 2008). Despite their growing numbers, the Hmong population had often been considered "hidden" in the sense that they were ethnic minorities even within their own countries of origin. When

included in research, they are often grouped under the country's majority ethnicity (e.g., Vietnamese) or labeled as other Asians (Kiang et al., 2016; Stright, Herr, & Neitzel, 2009). As such, psychological research on refugee populations like the Hmong has been scarce (Chen & Zhou, 2019; Kiang, Cheah, Huynh, Wang, & Yoshikawa, 2015; Stuart & Ward, 2019).

The unique migration history of the Hmong sets them apart from their East Asian counterparts and creates challenges for their settlement and acculturation. The U.S. recruited the Hmong's assistance during the Vietnam War and consequently many of the Hmong became targets of attack by the Lao government after the war (Lamborn & Moua, 2008). The U.S. were able to assist a small number of soldiers and families to safety, which left many of the remaining Hmong people to flee to refugee camps in Thailand (Moua & Vang, 2015). The first wave of Hmong immigrants in the U.S. thus consisted mainly of soldiers and their families, followed by families who had spent years in refugee camps (Ruefle, Ross, & Mandell, 1992). Many of these Hmong immigrants arrived with very few social and economic resources or transferable work skills. At present, many Hmong still live in poverty and have low educational attainment (Asia Pacific American Legal Center & Asian American Justice Center, 2011; Takei & Sakamoto, 2011). Furthermore, as the Hmong were predominantly an isolated tribe and typically resided in secluded areas with minimal exposure to other cultures, many showed reluctance and experienced difficulty adjusting to the cultural values of their new country (Ying & Han, 2008).

Moreover, the Hmong differ from their East Asian counterparts in their strategies for maintaining and passing on their culture. The written Hmong language was created in the late 1950s through the help of French missionaries. As a result, Hmong people in general lack the ability to read or write in their own language (Bosher, 1997; Ying & Han, 2008). Storytelling and oral communication remain the primary ways to pass on their history, beliefs, and values (Duffy, 2000). For example, the experiences of the Hmong people can often be found in story cloths, which typically illustrate multiple aspects of the Hmong history on a single piece of cloth through needlework (Hassel, 1984; Mallinson, Donnelly, & Hang, 1988).

### **Children's Storybooks as a Source of Ethnic Socialization**

Ethnic socialization refers to the process wherein information about one's ethnic background is transmitted from one individual to another and typically involves teachings of ethnicity-related social norms, behaviors, and attitudes (Brown & Krishnakumar, 2007). Various studies analyzing ethnic socialization with different racial and ethnic groups often highlighted the importance of parents (e.g., Juang et al., 2018; Nelson, Syed, Tran, Hu, & Lee, 2018). This pattern is also seen with the Hmong American literature such that of the few existing studies, the majority have focused on parental practices and messages from the perspectives of Hmong adolescents and young adults (Brown & Ling, 2012; Lamborn et al., 2012; Supple & Small, 2006). As such, literature has largely neglected the role of peers, other adults, and the media in the teaching of Hmong heritage. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on this specific topic with younger children. According to Erik Erikson's (1968) ego identity model, a person's identity

begins in early childhood. Supporting this idea, prior research has shown that children as young as two years of age are aware of social categories such as race (Serrano-Villar & Calzada, 2015). To understand ethnic identity development, it would be remiss to ignore ethnic socialization in early childhood years.

Young children may be able to learn about their ethnic heritage and cultural values through a variety of sources such as their parents or ethnicity-related media (e.g., books, music, or movies highlighting specific ethnic groups). Often, a primary goal of socialization for immigrant and ethnic minority parents is to maintain cultural heritage at home and have children internalize traditional cultural values (Bornstein & Lansford, 2010). Ethnic socialization may be more prominent in refugee families because they typically no longer have access to their countries of origin. Thus, parents and media may play a vital role in transmitting ethnicity-related information to the younger generations (Ferguson, Costigan, Clarke, & Ge, 2016). To date, the ethnic socialization literature has primarily focused on the role of parent-child relationships (Else-Quest & Morse, 2015; Supple, Dunbar, Kian, & Stein, 2018; White, Knit, Jensen, & Gonzales, 2018). Extending research to include other sources of socialization such as ethnicity-related storybooks could offer further insight into the process through which children learn about their cultural heritage.

Ethnicity-related storybooks can impart important messages about what it means to have a certain cultural heritage (Suprawati, Anggoro, & Bukatko, 2014; Tsai, Louie, Chen, & Uchida, 2007). A common approach to categorizing cultures has been the distinction between collectivism versus individualism, and belonging to either one is

related to the development of specific patterns of emotions, behaviors, and cognition (Brewer & Chen, 2007; Oyserman, 2017). Individualism often endorses norms such as independence and autonomy, such that individuals perceive themselves as unique. In comparison, collectivism is often associated with interdependence and a sense of self defined in relation to others or to the group as a whole (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

Previous cultural research has compared the degree of individualism and collectivism in media tailored to different ethnic groups. An interdisciplinary meta-analysis of 51 studies from fields such as psychology, communication, and business examined the common themes portrayed in various cultural products (described as any media offering “tangible, shared representation of culture,” Lamoreaux & Morling, 2012, p. 300). Consistent with the findings that North American individuals are more likely than East Asians to think and behave based on individualistic concerns, North American cultural products on average were found to be more individualistic compared to East Asian cultural products (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008).

In a similar vein, Suprawati and colleagues (2014) found that achievement-related messages in storybooks differed according to the protagonist’s cultural background, emphasizing either individual abilities (North American) or outside support such as family help (Asian). These results suggest that culture can be reflected and represented in children’s storybooks and the books have the potential to relay cultural lessons from generation to generation, contributing to the development of ethnic identity by assisting young children in becoming more aware of the differences between themselves and others (Kim, Green, & Klein, 2006). Another important aspect of storybooks is their

ability to introduce children to language literacy. Being exposed to one's ethnic language allows children to develop linguistically to communicate with family members who do not speak English and possibly contribute to building a stronger ethnic identity (Extra & Yagmur, 2010; Prevoo et al., 2014).

As a cultural product, storybooks have the potential to reflect cultural traditions as well as cultural shifts. Zhang and Morrison (2010) found that Chinese traditional values such as conflict avoidance were consistently reflected within Chinese children's stories published from the 1980s to the 2000s. In addition, they observed the introduction and increased presence of Western cultural values such as open expression of opinions, while some Chinese values like respect for elders decreased. Their findings suggested that children's literature can be used to analyze social change, as we may see that the introduction of a new culture (Western culture in this case) can impact the cultural values seen in children's stories.

Cultural products such as Hmong children's books can potentially be used to gain additional insight into the cultural practices and values that are important to their community. Compared to the majority of U.S. Americans, the Hmong culture may be more collectivistic. Hmong people have been noted to place emphasis on respect, obedience, and deference to one's parents and elders (Supple & Small, 2006), and familial obligations (e.g. translating for non-English family members, caretaking of younger siblings) have been voiced by Hmong American adolescents as a common theme in their households (Lamborn, Nguyen, & Bocanegra, 2012). In terms of cultural orientations, these values align more with collectivism than with individualism. However,

some level of cultural change may be possible for the Hmong people who immigrated to the U.S. and experienced its Western values.

A primary aim of the present study was to analyze cultural representation of Hmong Americans within Hmong children's books by examining Hmong traditional practices along with Western values that are representative of American culture. The current study addressed several gaps in existing research. First, it further examined the specificity within the umbrella category of Asians to study the phenomenon of an under-studied refugee group, the Hmong people. Second, it expanded the focus of ethnic socialization from adolescents to younger children. Third, it shifted away from parental socialization to media socialization. Being able to uncover salient cultural themes can help us gain a clearer picture of what it means to be Hmong and possibly guide future research with other minority groups. The following research questions were of interest: (1) What Hmong traditional practices are presented in Hmong children's books? (2) Are there similar or different numbers of American values displayed in Hmong children's books compared to non-Hmong American children's books?



## **Method**

### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 30 children's books marketed towards Hmong ( $n = 15$ ) and non-Hmong American ( $n = 15$ ) children between the ages 0-9 years (see Appendix). This wide age range partially reflected the scarcity of Hmong children's books. Selection criteria for the Hmong and non-Hmong American books included being labeled as best sellers and intended for young children. The books included picture storybooks, fairy tales, folk tales, and history from over 20 different publishers (e.g., Shen's Books, Chronicle Books). All books included characters that were either human or non-human (e.g., cars, animals). The length of books ranged from 15 to 57 pages, and the books were published between 1964 and 2018. Hmong books were defined as those that used Hmong language or with protagonists identified as Hmong and they were identified through the only Hmong bookstore in the U.S. ([www.HmongABC.com](http://www.HmongABC.com)) or from an online forum (Littletribe, 2015). Hmong books were monolingual in Hmong or bilingual in both Hmong and English. Popular non-Hmong American children's books were identified through Amazon ([www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com)) under the best-seller list of young children's storybooks. The books were identified and selected between September and November of 2018.

### **Deductive Analysis**

Content analysis helps to uncover patterns within qualitative data and present the findings qualitatively and/or quantitatively (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). In addition, the deductive approach allows one to test the generalizability of previous

research. Book content was analyzed using a coding scheme, which consisted of a checklist of Hmong traditional practices (Moua & Lamborn, 2010) and a list of American values (Rodriguez, O'Neel, Mistry, Brown, Chow, & White, 2016; Zhang & Morrison, 2010) deduced from prior research.

**Hmong traditional practices.** The Hmong checklist (Table 1) was adapted from Hmong traditional practices reported by Hmong American youths as important in their lives (Moua & Lamborn, 2010). This checklist included 10 traditional practices, and the five most frequently reported were: participating in cultural events (e.g., attending New Year celebrations), sharing the Hmong history (can sometimes be enclosed in folktale stories), wearing traditional clothing (typically worn for special occasions such as a wedding ceremony), preparing traditional food, and using the Hmong language (ability to read and write in the Hmong language).

Table 1

*List of Hmong Traditional Categories and Examples*

<b>Hmong Traditional Practices</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Participation in cultural events	Participating in cultural events such as ball tossing at the New Year festival
Sharing history	Sharing stories from back in Thailand, Laos, and/or refugee camps
Preparing traditional food	Eating Hmong food; gardening to make food
Using the Hmong language	Speaking, writing, or reading through Hmong language
Wearing traditional clothes	Teaching individuals how to wear Hmong clothes
Strengthening of family ties	Encouraging individuals to help family members
Emphasizing ethnic pride	Mentioning how the Hmong are special
Expressing high expectations	Working hard and doing better than parents; taking advantage of opportunities in U.S.
Marriage preparation	Teaching individuals how to cook for future husband's family
Religious participation	Participating in Shaman ceremonies

**American values.** There were a total of nine values for the American values checklist (Table 2). Rodriguez et al. (2010, 2016) proposed four cultural values pertaining to young adolescents' definitions of what it means to be American: country of birth, pride in American goodness, cultural behaviors, and American ideals. However, the fourth value was exemplified by some personality traits related to American ideals that were vague in description (the authors stated stereotypes linked to American ideals but failed to define them). Consequently, the definitions and descriptions of the first three values proposed by Rodriguez and colleagues were retained, and Zhang and Morrison's (2010) study was

referenced to expand on the fourth value related to American ideals. This value was expanded and replaced by six values reflective of Western attitudes and behaviors described by Zhang and Morrison (2010): holding of a different position, open expression of ideas, open display of emotions, egalitarianism in relationships, individual orientation and self-accomplishments, and adulation of youth. Zhang and Morrison (2010) explained that such values have been found to revolve around freedom and individuality, and therefore the devised checklist reflects that perspective.

Table 2

*List of American Values and Examples*

<b>American Values</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Country of birth/residence	Born in the U.S.
Belonging/pride in American goodness	Feeling good/proud to be an American
Cultural behaviors	Behaviors related to being “American” like speaking English
Holding of a different position	I am wrong and you are right
Open direct expression of thoughts and ideas	A student telling a teacher they’re wrong for giving them such a low grade
Open display of emotions	Overt display of a specific emotion (e.g., anger)
Egalitarianism in status and relationships	Teacher letting student explain their wrong answers
Individual orientation and self-accomplishments	I am successful because of my own hard work
Adulation of youth	You are great or you are so smart

**Procedure**

Each book was read to gain a general understanding of the storyline. Each illustration (i.e., each scene) was then checked for the embedded cultural practices and values. For each scene, all categories from both checklists were reviewed and checked off if they were shown. The corresponding text to each scene was not analyzed but was used to give context to the illustrated scene.

Five of the Hmong books contained story cloths, which are cloths that have been embellished with events depicting the Hmong history through needlework. Typically, these story cloths are stitched with many different scenes without any barriers to separate them. As such, it was difficult to demarcate the scenes within a story cloth and scenes with story cloths were omitted from analysis.

### **Inductive Analysis**

After gaining an understanding of the storyline and general impression of Hmong cultural themes within the books, an inductive approach was used to consider emergent themes not captured by the deductive analysis, which had focused on the individualistic-collectivistic cultural orientations. For example, the agrarian lifestyle may be depicted more often in the Hmong than the non-Hmong American books. Specifically, this inductive process involved taking notes of potential cultural themes while the Hmong books were analyzed using the checklists. Any culture-specific concept, behavior, or event that did not emerge during the deductive analysis procedure was reviewed for possible inclusion as a new cultural theme for coding. Notes of potential cultural themes were compared for any overlapping with the checklists or with other potential themes (Aronson, Callahan, & O'Brien, 2018). All Hmong books were then checked using the

themes that were sufficiently distinct, and a theme was classified as an emergent theme if it was observed across three or more books.

### **Interrater Reliability**

An undergraduate student blind to the research questions of the study was recruited to code 25% of the data. The second rater underwent training to become proficient with the checklists (for deductive analysis) and the potential themes (for inductive analysis). Training sessions included detailed instruction and discussion of the definitions and examples of the cultural themes. Interrater reliability was calculated for each book: The total agreement (coded as observed or unobserved by both raters) was divided by the total number of coding instances (i.e., number of scenes multiplied by the number of themes to be coded; e.g., each scene of a Hmong book has 10 coding instances, or 10 themes to be coded as observed or unobserved). Averaging across the books and checklists, the raters agreed at least 89% of the time.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Analysis Plan**

The aim of the study was to assess cultural representation of Hmong traditional practices in Hmong children's books. In addition, the study attempted to compare the salience of American values in Hmong and non-Hmong American children's books. Descriptive statistics and a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 24 (*IBM® SPSS® Statistics*, 2016 ).

### **General Characteristics of Books**

General characteristics of the Hmong and non-Hmong American books are summarized in Table 3. Data regarding the ethnicity of authors and illustrators were collected for both American and Hmong children's books, and results showed that Hmong books were primarily written and illustrated by Hmong authors. However, some Hmong books (40%) were illustrated by non-Hmong authors. Although Hmong illustrators who have experienced the Hmong culture firsthand may be more accurate in cultural representation, non-Hmong illustrators can provide a unique perspective when they are familiar with the Hmong group due to either having spent considerable time in Hmong refugee camps or residing in areas with a dense Hmong population (e.g., Minnesota). More research would be needed to further tease apart if being born as a Hmong person or experiencing the culture as a non-Hmong individual influences how the Hmong are represented within Hmong children's books.

Additional data regarding the targeted audience, publication year, and book length were also compared. The majority of both Hmong (73.3%) and American (80%)

children's books selected for this study were marketed towards children between kindergarten and the third-grade, suggesting that the books selected for this study were marketed toward a similar age group. In terms of time of publication, there were more recently published Hmong books (10 of 15 books published after 2010) compared to American books (7 of 15 books published after 2010). As previously mentioned, oral storytelling has been more common than print media as a method of cultural transmission within the Hmong community. Therefore, it was not surprising that Hmong books in general were published later than non-Hmong American books. Finally, within both the Hmong and the American children's books, over 70% of the books contained 21 to 40 pages and 11 to 30 scenes per book, suggesting generally similar lengths across the two groups of books.



Table 3

*Characteristics of Hmong and non-Hmong American Children's Books*

	<b>Hmong Books</b>	<b>American Books</b>
Total	15 (100%)	15 (100%)
Author		
Hmong	12 (80%)	0 (0%)
Not Hmong	3 (20%)	100 (0%)
Illustrator		
Hmong	9 (60%)	0 (%)
Not Hmong	6 (40%)	100 (0%)
Target Age Group		
Birth-Preschool	3 (20%)	3 (20%)
Kindergarten-Grade 3	11 (73.3%)	12 (80%)
Grade 4+	1 (6.6%)	0 (0%)
Publication Year		
1990-1999	4 (26.6%)	6 (40%)
2000-2009	1 (6.6%)	2 (13.3%)
2010+	10 (66.6%)	7 (46.6%)
Pages Per Book		
1-20	2 (13.3%)	0 (0%)
21-40	13 (86.6%)	11 (73.3%)
41+	0 (0%)	4 (26.7%)
Scenes Per Book		
1-10	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)
11-20	10 (66.7%)	6 (40%)
21-30	4 (26.7%)	7 (46.7%)
31+	0 (0%)	2 (13.3%)

**Which Hmong Cultural Values Were Represented?**

The first research question was: What type of Hmong traditional practices are displayed in Hmong children's books? To test this hypothesis, frequencies are counts calculated to determine the number of scenes that displayed frequencies in each category. One of the Hmong books showed no displays of any of the Hmong traditional practices and was excluded from further analysis. Of the remaining 14 Hmong books, there were a

total of 259 scenes, and 162 (60.4%) were matched with one or more Hmong traditional practice. No Hmong traditional practices were observed in the remaining 106 scenes (39.6%). Summing across the 162 coded scenes, Hmong traditional practices were coded 223 times. Frequencies of coded cultural practices can be found in Table 4.

Wearing of traditional Hmong clothes was observed most often, appearing in 160 of the 162 (98.8%) coded scenes across 13 of the 14 (92.9%) books. In other words, if a scene or a book was coded as depicting Hmong cultural practices, traditional clothing was almost always featured. Traditional Hmong food was the second most common practice observed, appearing in 28 of the 162 (17.3%) coded scenes across 9 of the 12 (64.3%) books. Despite overall low representation across the scenes, traditional food was observed in more than half of the books. All the other cultural practices were observed infrequently. The third to fifth commonly coded were participation of cultural events, sharing of the Hmong history, and strengthening of family ties with each observed at least 5 times but accounted for less than 7.0% of the coded scenes. It should be noted that almost all of the traditional practices were seen in at least three of the 14 books, suggesting that the observed prevalence of Hmong traditional practices was not driven by a few books.

Two of the traditional practices were never observed: marriage preparation and using the Hmong language. A possible explanation for not observing marriage preparation is the target audience of the books. Almost all of the books (13 of 14 books) were intended for pre-pubescent children (i.e., third grade or below, see Table 3), who may not be as prepared to think about prepping for marriage as the adolescent participants in Moua and

Lamborn’s (2010) study. Using the Hmong language was not observed, as characters had to display encouragements of either learning or using the Hmong language, which could be difficult to convey through illustrations. It could be possible that books that provide both Hmong and English translations are already encouraging the use of Hmong language, but this speculated function requires further research.

Table 4

*Number (Percentages) of Coded Scenes and Books Depicting Hmong Cultural Practices*

<b>Cultural Practice</b>	<b>Scenes</b>	<b>Books</b>
Traditional Clothing	160 (98.8%)	13 (92.9%)
Traditional Food	28 (17.3%)	9 (64.3%)
Cultural Events	10 (6.2%)	3 (21.4%)
Share History	9 (5.6%)	4 (28.6%)
Family Ties	7 (4.3%)	5 (35.7%)
Religion	4 (2.5%)	3 (21.4%)
High Expectations	3 (1.9%)	3 (21.4%)
Ethnic Pride	2 (1.2%)	1 (7.1%)

*Note.* A coded scene or book was one that depicted at least one Hmong traditional practice. There were a total of 162 coded scenes across a total of 14 coded books.

The most common traditional practice observed in this study was wearing of traditional Hmong clothes. Characters were typically shown to be wearing traditional clothing or shown stitching together with family members. Regardless of the book’s general plot (i.e., books about Hmong history or the cultural festival), Hmong children’s

books often displayed characters wearing traditional clothes. In comparison to adolescents who may have a stronger sense of self (Erikson, 1986) and what it means to be Hmong, younger children may be less cognitively prepared to examine deeper questions of the self and one's identity. As such, Hmong books targeting younger audiences probably illustrate characters in such a salient way as to help young readers differentiate Hmong from other ethnicities. Alternatively, it may serve to address a different challenge in ethnic identity development. Past studies have noted that a person's country of birth serves to facilitate racial or ethnic identification (Rodriguez, O'Neel, Mistry, Brown, Chow, & White, 2016; Rodriguez, Schwartz, & Whitborne, 2010). However, Hmong people are widely dispersed and do not have a strong country affiliation. Traditional Hmong clothes and embroidery skills may be the primary ways to identify as a Hmong individual. This could be another reason for showing the book characters repeatedly with Hmong clothes.

The second most common traditional practice observed was the presence of traditional Hmong food and farming. Hmong food can be seen as another form of Hmong representation. Scenes often highlighted Hmong food as a shared activity with family members and Hmong food as being healthy, which aligns with past research (Roche, Goto, Zhao, & Wolff, 2015; Vue, Wolff, & Goto, 2011). Characters were also displayed in farming within family gardens that were located either in their own backyards or within the larger community. Supporting the family in finance and sustenance through farming was often the message within these particular Hmong books. This is consistent with Moua and Lamborn's (2010) findings, which showed that vegetables from family

gardens were sold at local farmers' markets and that it served as a method to eat fresh but inexpensive food.

The third most common traditional practice observed in the current study was the participation in cultural events, in contrast with the prior finding that Hmong adolescents reported participation in cultural events as the most common form of ethnic socialization (Moua & Lamborn, 2010). Both the current sample of books and Hmong adolescents referred to participation in cultural events such as the annual New Year celebration and funeral rituals. However, the current research found only a few Hmong cultural events displayed within Hmong books despite it being the third most common cultural theme observed. A possible reason for this could be that cultural events such as the annual New Year celebration or funeral rituals primarily contain adult related activities (e.g., ball tossing game). Therefore, children's books may not contain such scenes.

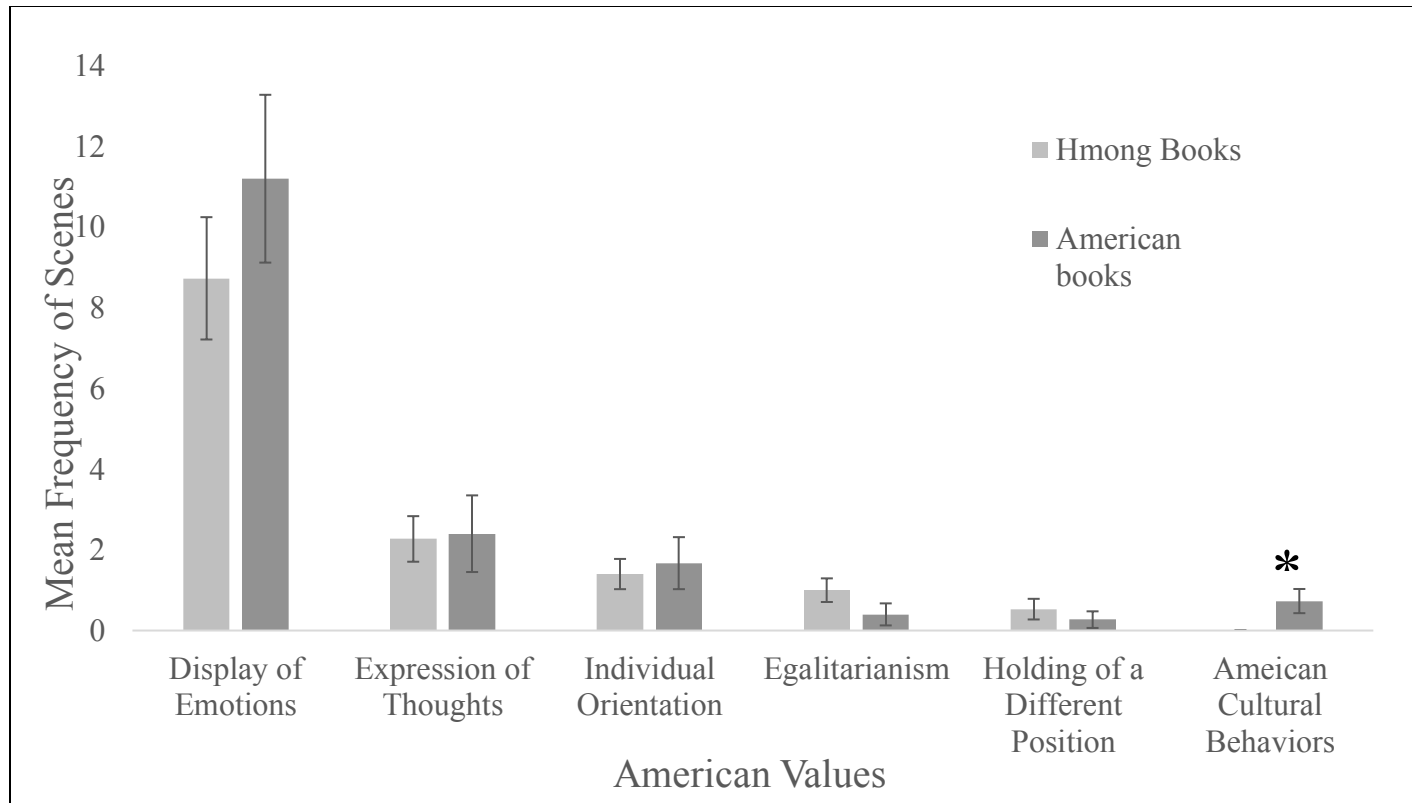
Sharing of Hmong history was also observed in the children's Hmong books, which was consistent with prior reports by Hmong adolescents (Moua & Lamborn, 2010). When observed, scenes displayed history transmission from a grandparent to a grandchild by using a story cloth as a method of storytelling (seen in *Grandfather's Story Cloth* and *The Whispering Cloth*). As many were illiterate in their own and the English language, Hmong women in refugee camps were encouraged by missionaries to transform their traditional needlework to be more appealing to the American audience. To do so, they began documenting their experiences through needlework for financial gains because there were few financial opportunities within the refugee camps. Story cloths made by the Hmong were not intentionally created to preserve cultural history and values. However,

as storytelling and oral communication of traditional values and beliefs diminished within the community possibly due to acculturating to one's new host country, these story cloths are now being used as a way of communicating about the Hmong's history and traditional beliefs (Kansas Historical Society, 2014; Science Buzz).

Lastly, Hmong books showed family ties or responsibility to the family, in only 7 of the 162 (4.3%) coded scenes but spread across 5 of the 15 (33.3%) books. For example, an extended family member from the community helps a widowed farmer to tend and sell her crops (seen in *The Greedy Couple*). This is also related to prior findings where adolescents mentioned the importance and value of helping extended family members (Moua & Lamborn, 2010), and aligns with collectivistic ideology as it emphasizes the needs of the group as a whole rather than the individual.

### **Are American Values Depicted Differently in Hmong vs. non-Hmong American Children's Books?**

The second research question pertained to the depiction of American values in Hmong children's books compared to non-Hmong American children's books. Three of the nine American values—country of birth, American pride, and youth adulation—were not represented in any of the books and thus excluded from analysis. A MANOVA was performed to compare group differences (Hmong vs. non-Hmong) in depicting the various American values (see Figure 1). The means for American cultural behaviors, holding of a different position, and egalitarianism were found to be outliers ( $> 3 SDs$ ). To correct for these outliers, the windsorizing method was performed such that they maintained the furthest values in the data set without being extreme outliers (Reifman, & Keyton, 2010).



*Figure 1.* American values by category across the two groups of books. Error bars represent standard errors. An asterisk represents a significant difference between the group means

Results of the MANOVA showed that the main effect of group was significant for American cultural behavior,  $F(1, 28) = 5.97, p = .02$ , partial eta squared = 0.18. Non-Hmong books ( $M = 0.73, SD = 1.16$ ) contained more scenes with characters engaging in American cultural behavior compared to Hmong books ( $M = 0, SD = 0$ ). The effect of group was not significant for all other values coded,  $F_s < 2.25, p_s > .15$ . Engagement in American cultural behaviors included actions such as eating American food or use of American related media like that of American music. This finding was not surprising as books marketed towards Hmong children may be charged with the purpose to teach young children about the behaviors and cultural events related to the Hmong people. As such, Hmong books were less likely than non-Hmong books to display American cultural behaviors like celebrating Western related holidays like Christmas and instead, displayed characters engaging in Hmong cultural events.

With the exception of American cultural behaviors, the results showed little difference between Hmong and non-Hmong books. This finding suggested that besides depicting Hmong traditional values, Hmong books also featured American values to an extent similar to the non-Hmong books. A possible explanation could be that the current sample of Hmong books were written and published in the U.S.. Therefore, they may contain more American values compared to Hmong books published outside the U.S.. It could also be that Hmong books were written by and for Hmong American individuals who are fluent in both languages and live in the U.S.. As such, the children's story book as a cultural product reflects its writers and readers, who are people that may hold both collectivistic and individualistic values. Thus, the Hmong books in the current research



represented a changing culture for the Hmong Americans. This finding was consistent with Zhang and Morrison's (2010) findings, which had found Chinese children's stories to reflect cultural changes over time (i.e., increasing Western values and decreasing Chinese traditional values).

### **Emergent Theme in Hmong Books: Death**

For a Hmong cultural theme to be classified as an emergent theme, it had to be represented by at least three Hmong books. The only theme that satisfied this criterion was the depiction of death, which was observed in 7 of the 15 (46.7%) Hmong books. None of the non-Hmong books in this study had any displays of death, although two did show the protagonist becoming old with age (*The Giving Tree* and *Love You Forever*). Other researchers have found that in popular American children's books that contain messages of death, the typical dying subject was a grandparent or a pet. In addition, the most cited cause of death was old age or an illness (e.g., cancer; Arruda-Colli, Weaver, Wiener, 2017; Guitierrez, Miller, Rosengren, & Schein, 2014). This suggests that books targeting young children tend to approach death as an internal body issue such that an individual dies because of failed bodily functions.

In contrast, the most observed cause of death in Hmong books was war combat and often involved family members or individuals of the greater community (e.g., villages). For example, there were multiple scenes throughout the book *The Terrible Journey* that illustrated soldiers with guns, soldiers being shot, and characters bleeding to death. In addition, there were multiple scenes that often stressed the Hmong's participation in the Vietnam War. As a result, death was a theme that often occurred alongside these scenes.

Books that incorporated a story cloth as the central focus such as *Dia's Storycloth* or *The Whispering Cloth* often contained scenes that displayed characters engaging in combat. Here, death was also mentioned in relation to fleeing during the Vietnam War. For example, in *The Whispering Cloth*, the protagonist lives with her grandmother in a refugee camp. When asked to recall memories of her parents, the granddaughter noted that she pictured them with “flashes, noises, and smells” that “bombarded her,” suggesting that the parents did not survive when fleeing to the refugee camps. In conclusion, death was a prominent theme and was portrayed differently in Hmong children's books compared to how it would have been featured in non-Hmong American children's books, which could be seen as a potential cultural clash, as Western societies may shy away from talking about death (Arruda-Colli et al., 2017) compared to other societies.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

A major contribution of the present study is that it expanded the current ethnic socialization research by focusing on the Hmong Americans, who are a refugee population. As prior research has focused on parent ethnic socialization from the adolescents' or adults' perspectives (Brown & Ling, 2012; Lamborn et al., 2012; Supple & Small, 2006), this study explored the potential uses of Hmong children's books as a way of socializing ethnic practices and values.

Showing various Hmong traditional practices, Hmong children's books could be used as a learning tool for Hmong Americans and others wanting to learn about the Hmong people. Therefore, a practical implication of this study is that it provides public educators

and parents insight regarding the types of cultural practices and the underlying values that are highlighted within Hmong children's books. It also brings awareness to themes such as death and how people like the Hmong may approach such topics with a younger audience. This can be useful for readers who are not accustomed to seeing or talking about violent combat related deaths when interacting with Hmong children's books.

There are a few limitations in the current study that future research can address. First, it was difficult to systematically examine issues related to the texts within these books because of the wide age range represented by Hmong books. As such, the study focused on analyzing illustrations, and some useful information, such as mental state explanations might have been omitted (Dyer-Seymour, Shatz, Wellman, & Saito, 2004). Readers typically use both texts and images when interacting with books, and future study could expand on the current findings by analyzing both illustrations and texts, so that to gain a better understanding of their roles in ethnic socialization.

Another limitation is the potential bias in sampling. Unlike the non-Hmong American children's books, Hmong children's books were rarely indexed by mainstream search engines such as Google or Amazon. Rather, most of these books were found through online discussion and blog posts. In addition, many of these Hmong books were not publicly available, and some had to be obtained by the researcher's personal request made to the authors. Thus, the sampled books may be geared towards individuals who have internet access, along with the ability and motivation to search and obtain Hmong children's books.

The scarcity and difficulty of obtaining Hmong children's books raises important questions about user motivation. As these books are difficult to obtain and not readily accessible compared to non-Hmong children's books, consumers of these books could be individuals who are more motivated to teach themselves or others about the Hmong people. As a result, they could possibly already have an established or stronger sense of ethnic identity compared to individuals who do not seek out Hmong books. Future research should examine reasons why some may choose to use Hmong children's books when non-Hmong children's books are more readily accessible.

Lastly, we do not know how parents or children will engage with these Hmong books. As previously mentioned, many of the Hmong population are not literate in their own language, thus it is difficult to know what additional adlibs or commentaries parents may provide. Furthermore, the current findings cannot conclude if reading Hmong children's books contribute to the development of ethnic identity. A recommendation for future research is to examine how parents engage with their young readers when using these books and how this may relate to the strength of ethnic identity in children. Future research could address this by developing a longitudinal study that follows parent-child dyads who use these Hmong books and tracks the development of one's ethnic identity.

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to explore children's books as a potential tool for ethnic socialization, by examining the types of Hmong and American practices and values depicted by Hmong American children's books. Specifically, Hmong and non-Hmong American children's books were analyzed using checklists devised from the

ethnic-socialization and ethnic-identity literature. Overall, Hmong children's books featured both traditional Hmong practices and American values. Wearing of Hmong traditional clothes was the most-observed traditional cultural practice in the Hmong books which may be a way to highlight the Hmong heritage for young children. Furthermore, the emergent theme of death was uniquely observed in the Hmong children's books, and death was depicted in a violent, typically combat-related, manner, reflecting the cultural history of the Hmong people as a refugee group. At the same time for the majority of the American values examined, Hmong children's books depicted the values to the same extent as non-Hmong American children's books. Thus, Hmong American children's books presented themes related to both the Hmong heritage and the American culture.

As the Hmong continue to live within the U.S., their traditional beliefs and practices may change such that they may hold both collectivistic and individualistic values. The current findings support this idea, as displays of both American values and Hmong practices were found within Hmong books. The current findings thus demonstrate that analyzing ethnicity-related content in children's books may serve to expand our understanding of the important cultural practices and values for an ethnic minority community.

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## Appendix

### List of Storybooks

<b>Hmong/Hmong American</b>	<b>Non-Hmong American</b>
<i>Grandfather's Story Cloth</i> , by Linda Gerdner & Sarah Langford	<i>The Wonky Donkey</i> , by Craig Smith & Katz Cowley
<i>Ua si! Ua si! (Play Play)</i> , by MyKou Thao	<i>Construction Site on Christmas Night</i> , by Sherri Duskey Rinker
<i>Kuv Ua Tau (I Can Do It!)</i> , by Mykou Thao	<i>Giraffes Can't Dance</i> , by Giles Andreae & Guy Parker-Rees
<i>Nine-in-one, Grr! Grr!</i> , Cathy Spagnoli	<i>The Pout Pout fish</i> , Deborah Diesen & Dan Hanna
<i>Jouanah: a Hmong Cinderella</i> , by Jewell Reinhard Coburn	<i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> , by Eric Carle & Dolly Parton
<i>Ka's Garden (Kab Lub Vaj)</i> , by Maggie Lee & Beelo Vong Lao	<i>Goodnight Moon</i> , by Margaret Wise Brown & Clement Hurd
<i>The Gift: The Hmong New Year</i> , by Ia Xiong	<i>Love You Forever</i> , by Robert Munsch & Sheila McGraw
<i>Dia's Storycloth</i> , by Dia Cha	<i>The Giving Tree</i> , by Shel Silverstein
<i>The Forbidden Treasure</i> , by See Lor	<i>Oh! The Places You'll Go</i> , by Dr. Seuss
<i>The Magic Stone</i> , by See Lor	<i>Where Do Diggers Sleep At Night?</i> , by Brianna Caplan Sayres & Christian Slade
<i>The Greedy couple</i> , by See Lor	<i>The Rooster Who Would Not Be Quiet</i> , by Carmen Agra Deedy & Eugen Yelchin
<i>Tsev Neeg Uas Kuv Hlub (The family I Love)</i> , by See Lor	<i>The Wonderful Things You Will Be</i> , by Emily Winfield Martin
<i>Leej Twg Hlub Koj? (Who Loves You?)</i> , Stephanie Xiong	<i>Where The Wild Things Are</i> , by Maurice Sendak
<i>The Terrible Journey</i> , by Cha Yang	<i>The Snowy Day</i> , by Ezra Jack Keats
<i>The Whispering Cloth</i> , by Pegi Deitz Shea	<i>Corduroy</i> , by Don Freeman