

# Hmong Christian elites as political and development brokers

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SEB RUMSBY

# Hmong Christian elites as political and development brokers: competition, cooperation and mimesis in Vietnam's highlands

This article focuses on the role of new Hmong religious leaders – predominantly young men – who have played an important role in spreading Protestant Christianity across Vietnam's highlands over the past 30 years. These pastors and evangelists have directly challenged the authority of previously established Hmong local elites, whose legitimacy rested on traditional religious authority and/or state patronage, causing significant social conflict along the way. Some new Christian pioneers have gained local elite status as political and development brokers for their community, enjoying a potent combination of spiritual authority, strong external networks and financial success. As such, international religious networks can function as alternative patrons to the state for well-placed Hmong Christian elites to tap into and redistribute to their communities – to varying degrees. Contextualising such leadership dynamics within wider anthropological scholarship of upland Southeast Asia affirms the 'pioneering ethos' of local elites in challenging, complying with or mimicking state forms of governance in their attempts to draw in and channel external potency. This highlights the degree of political manoeuvring space available to non-state actors in a supposedly authoritarian state, as well as ongoing tensions and controversies facing pastors who negotiate ambiguous relationships with powerful external forces.

**Key words** Hmong, Christianity, Vietnam, brokerage, elites

## Introduction

Over the past 30 years, Vietnam's highlands have witnessed a rapid and widespread religious transformation as perhaps a third of the 1.4 million of Vietnam's Hmong population have converted to evangelical Christianity.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is all the more remarkable for the 'remote' nature of proselytisation in the absence of physically present missionaries; instead, highlanders tuned into Hmong-language evangelical radio broadcasts and proactively spread the message from village to village (Ngô 2016; this issue). Already here we catch a glimpse of the 'pioneering ethos' (Petit 2015) of upland actors in their surprising religious agency with minimal external support, in spite of (or, perhaps, fuelled by) significant state-sponsored religious persecution.

<sup>1</sup> In this article, 'Christianity' refers explicitly to Protestantism as opposed to Catholicism, which, while also present among Hmong populations in Vietnam, is far smaller in scale, with a longer and more stable historical trajectory, and is not presently causing the same disruptions to local elites and the everyday politics of development.

According to Vietnamese-language literature, Hmong Christianity is causing inter-generational disharmony as younger pastors challenge and undermine the authority of elders who are less likely to embrace the new faith (Nguyễn 2009: 149). Vươ̄ng Duy Quang bluntly states that conversion has made the Hmong shaman become ‘useless’ (D. Q. Vươ̄ng 2005: 193). However, Nguyễn Quỳnh Trâm (2016) sees it in a more positive light: Christian doctrine of equality before God contradicts traditional Hmong hierarchies, ‘giving space for a “new class” – those leaders of Protestant groups, pastors, evangelists, etc. – most of whom are young people’ (2016: 88). These new elites ‘aren’t only religious actors but “spokespersons” of the community, acting on behalf of the village regarding communicating and making proposals to the authorities’ (Nguyễn 2010: 42).

These excerpts point to an important power shift within Hmong communities of upland Vietnam: the rise of new Christian elites. This article builds on existing studies by investigating the everyday political, spiritual and economic dynamics that enable pastors to command such communal authority. By acting as ‘development brokers’, challenging local authority power, mimicking state forms of governance or accumulating wealth and prestige for themselves, church leaders forge ambiguous relations with external sources of potency and channel them in ways that resemble traditional practices within upland Southeast Asia’s politico-spiritual landscape. The enduring role of religion in overlapping with political and economic spheres to impact grassroots aspirations and experiences of ‘development’ is highlighted through a fine-grained analysis of local elites mediating dominant-weak relationships, as nodes within broader webs of unequal power relations. In turn, this focus on upland pioneers contributes to wider anthropological debates concerning elites, brokerage and legitimacy.

This article begins with an extended case study that illustrates the power, ambitions and tactics of Hmong Christian elites amid controversy balancing competing patrons. Ethnographic fieldwork reveals how religious leaders combine spiritual authority, charisma and extensive networks to impact local political economies in both accumulative and empowering ways. Prominent pastors may act as rival authorities to state actors due to their ability to mobilise and advocate on behalf of their Hmong congregations. At the same time as critiquing government corruption, they may also imitate some of the state’s technologies of governance in their attempts to mobilise their communities and expand Protestant influence.

I then frame the case study within wider anthropological scholarship of Southeast Asian highlands, focusing on a few relevant conceptual strands rather than attempting a comprehensive theoretical review. Charisma, brokerage skills and confidence are identified as key characteristics of upland pioneers within an ongoing, unstable ‘social oscillation’ of leadership cycles. Equally important to consider are national and transnational religious networks that can be seen as new ‘patrons’ in addition to the state, providing alternative sources of funding, networking and education opportunities. Existing and aspiring pastors are ideally positioned to tap into new financial and information flows, thereby assuming an informal role akin to Lewis and Mosse’s ‘development brokers’ (2006). This leads on to a concluding discussion about mimesis as a useful lens to understand dynamic relationships between highland elites and lowland state actors as rival and/or convergent pioneers of modernity.

## Methodological considerations

This article draws from extensive multi-method fieldwork in Vietnam's Northwest highlands from 2016 to 2017, which included extensive ethnographic observation, focus groups and hundreds of in-depth interviews with Hmong farmers, students, local officials, community leaders and religious practitioners (both Christian and non-Christian). I required the institutional support of Hanoi's University of Social Sciences and Humanities for fieldwork access, which effectively selected two of my three primary fieldwork sites – but I managed to negotiate varying degrees of freedom to roam outside the determined villages. Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, with a local Hmong research assistant who could interpret into Hmong language for many older interlocutors who did not speak Vietnamese. Official research assistants in Vietnam often complicate the researcher's positionality, since they have a secondary role of reporting back on politically sensitive elements of fieldwork activities (Sowerwine 2013). Fortunately, my assigned research assistant was quite relaxed and busy with other activities, so it was possible to conduct unsupervised fieldwork for about half of the time; it was during these times that much of the subsequent data in Pastor Seng's village was generated.

My positionality as a white Westerner ensured a clear outsider status, which has both limitations and opportunities. On the one hand, I ran into trouble from some Vietnamese local authorities and policemen who were suspicious about my possible links to foreign Western missionaries – a problematic association, given the state's historical and present-day hostility to external Christian influence, especially in the highlands (see below). On the other hand, the very same association with a supposedly 'Christian' country helped me gain the curiosity of Hmong Christians and recruit interviewees. What's more, given the antagonistic dynamics of ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority) chauvinism and heavy-handed state policies that have tended to belittle Hmong culture and promote ethnic assimilation, the fact that neither I nor my research assistant were Kinh or official state employees may have assisted in opening up a space for research participants to air their opinions about politically sensitive issues.

Based on multiple interviews with not only the pastor himself but dozens of other church members and non-Christian neighbours, Seng's remarkable rise to power was chosen as a case study because it represents something of an 'ideal type', elucidating the characteristics and dynamics of elite formation and contestation that are present (but usually less extreme or obvious) among most church leaders I met during fieldwork. My findings confirm other studies documenting the plethora of socio-economic activities in which ethnic minority pastors are involved: acting as business consultants, organising their congregations into informal economic cooperatives, networking and promoting tourism for their village, negotiating for lower interest for their neighbours' loans and teaching new skills, savings and investment principles (cf. Chung 2017: 5; Rumsby 2021). In this article, however, I focus on one particular case study in order to privilege ethnographic 'richness, texture and detail' (Ortner 1995: 173–4) as far as is possible in this limited word space.

## Negotiating with the state

Seng<sup>2</sup> is a charismatic pastor in his thirties from an influential family in a Hmong village where around 70 of the 270 households are Christian, in Lào Cai province of

<sup>2</sup> All names in this case study are pseudonyms.

Vietnam's northwest highlands. He describes his conversion in 2004 as a 'reformation of thinking'; his father, a former shaman, and youngest aunt also converted around the same time. This caused serious family conflict as Seng's two uncles and other aunt did not convert; what's more, Uncle Long had just attained a prominent position in the commune People's Committee. Long tried to persuade them to reconsider, offering Seng an official position if he renounced his faith; when Seng refused, his uncle got angry and disowned him. When Seng later recounted this episode to me in Vietnamese (although the original conversation would have been in Hmong), he dramatically emphasised this grievous insult in his narration of their dialogue by switching Long's use of personal pronouns from 'uncle/nephew' (*chú/cháu*) to the disrespectful 'me/you' (*tôi/mày*) halfway through the exchange.

Soon after, widespread religious persecution broke out across the district, as local authorities confiscated (and encouraged non-Christian relatives to appropriate) livestock from converts. This culminated in land being seized from 12 households – not Seng or his father, but Christians from less prestigious families. Anyone who spoke out faced being arrested and locked up in a toilet cell at the commune People's Committee. In response, the church commissioned Seng to travel to Hanoi to contact a Kinh Christian lawyer, who helped him submit a complaint case to the central authorities and trigger an official investigation. Local police officers were sent round to intimidate witnesses before the Hanoi cadres arrived; nevertheless, the investigation resulted in the commune president being transferred, local authorities being warned not to use force against citizens and land being returned to the Christian community.

Pastor Seng's social status rocketed after this intervention, as Christians were afforded protection under his leadership while officials learned to respect (or be intimidated by) his advocacy abilities. Seng has taken a confrontational approach to government hostility, teaching Christians to film instances of persecution or police brutality on mobile phones so it can be used as evidence – either to higher authorities or international human rights groups. He also warns cadres that if the Hmong are not allowed to practise their faith here, then they are quite willing to migrate and seek asylum abroad with their evidence, which would cause embarrassment to the local authorities.

As the most well-travelled person in his community and having interacted with various state bodies, Seng understands in what ways state actors can be pressurised and utilises them when necessary – although he may have exaggerated or embellished stories about his own political clout. This strategy has been largely successful as Seng's church (the largest in the district, with several hundred members) has been officially recognised, and the now commune president Uncle Long has apparently let bygones be bygones. In a private interview, Long praised the positive effects of Christianity on some formerly unruly families who 'don't drink alcohol anymore, then they don't fight and curse each other, so their lives are better', but also bemoaned their lack of knowledge about traditional customs. Long also relies on his nephew Seng's authority for resolving civil disturbances among the Hmong Christian community, who don't always respect the authority of local cadres; he admitted that 'with Seng as pastor, a teacher, whatever he says then the people really listen. They really follow.'

Most Hmong churches in Vietnam engage in unregistered social outreach activities, but Seng's unusual relationship with local authorities has enabled his church to work more openly. Public projects have included distributing pigs to poor households in the community, whereby successful breeders in the church were encouraged to act as mentors to newcomers, and distributing electricity generators in a neighbouring

village. Apparently, when state officials turned up and demanded official permission (which had not been attained), Seng replied, 'we're helping the people that you're unable to help, why aren't you happy about it?' Another time, the pastor overstepped the mark by inviting a team of Korean doctors to set up informal 'open clinics' at churches for sick locals to be diagnosed and treated. There were no repercussions in Seng's village, but later when visiting a nearby village the doctors were detained and forced to pay a fine of 20 million VND (US\$1000) for not seeking official permission. These constraints are a source of resentment towards local authorities, who (from the perspective of local Christians) appear to do their utmost to prevent outsiders from helping the Hmong – without offering any help themselves.

### From confrontation to cooperation

In recent years, church and state relations in Seng's village have shifted away from confrontation towards more cooperative interactions. A turning point was in the summer of 2014, during which Sino-Vietnamese tensions had reached critical levels due to a naval standoff surrounding the placement of a Chinese oil rig in disputed waters. With reports of Chinese troops massing near the border, and invasion seen as a very real threat, church leaders from across the district were summoned to the district People's Committee. To their surprise, these Christians were not being arrested on suspicion of hostile activity but rather being recruited to 'mobilise' their congregations. Recognising the communal influence of pastors like Seng, cadres asked them to support the national cause by relaying information on proposed evacuation procedures to congregations and dissuading anyone from crossing the border. Apparently, they were even encouraged by the socialist authorities to pray for the welfare of Vietnam, to which Seng agreed and asked his church members to fast and pray for three days. Nowhere else in Vietnam has such an intimate church–state partnership been forged through the fires of borderlands tensions, if only temporarily.

Seng was subsequently invited to attend and speak as the sole Christian representative at an academic conference in Hanoi on Hmong ethno-religious policies, which I observed in 2016. The invitation was a bold move by the conference organiser, since official discussions around 'politically sensitive' issues are usually kept behind closed doors. At the conference, Seng was largely ignored and cold-shouldered by other academic and government attendees, being given just a few minutes to present near the end of the day. In his speech, Seng emphasised the positive life changes of Hmong Christians while arguing that any subversive activity was perpetrated by uneducated Christians, and actually perpetuated by official restrictions on training opportunities for church leaders. Tactfully raising concerns over institutional religious discrimination, Seng cited Police Circular 23, in effect since 2012, which states that communes in which 'illegal religion' (i.e. Christianity) has developed have failed the 'public order' criteria and are unable to attain the prized 'new countryside' (*nông thôn mới*) status (Police Department 2012).

Over the Lunar New Year of 2017, Seng pulled off his most visible political achievement to date: coordinating a one-day interdenominational Christian festival that was attended by around 2,000 Hmong people from surrounding villages. The logistics were achieved with the cooperation and financial support of nine churches across the district, providing a modest budget of 30 million VND (US\$1500) for the



**Figure 1** Main stage of Lunar New Year Christian festival  
**Source:** Author's photograph [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

stage, equipment, food, transport etc. The festival included preaching, worship songs, secular musical and dance performances, a talent contest, traditional New Year games and a huge lunch – distributed to everyone in plastic containers.

The main stage was a raised platform with a large backdrop containing an image of a white-skinned Jesus Christ looking over the iconic landscape of Vietnam's highlands (see Figure 1). The backdrop text, wishing a Happy New Year in bold red capital letters, is all the more striking because it is written not in the Vietnamese Hmong script but rather the 'American Hmong' RPA script, which is frowned on by Hmong officials (Ngô 2016) and almost never seen in such a bold public context in Vietnam. Mimicking aspects of state-organised festivals and cultural performances in format and style (cf. Ying Dao's contribution to this special issue), this festival was a political statement of authority and ability to wield symbolic power, since no one else apart from the state organises such large public events in the Northern highlands. Pastor Seng was instrumental in securing official permission at a district level, and a few commune cadres showed their face in the morning but left almost immediately. Nevertheless, the festival was considered a big success and the plan was to expand it into a two-day festival in the future.

### **Controversy balancing patrons**

In our initial interview, Seng emphasised the importance of obeying the authorities, using imagery that verged on state propaganda: 'the state is like a house, and the people

are like the materials – everyone must contribute’. However, over the course of further fieldwork conversations, Seng disclosed deep frustrations and anger towards government corruption, ethnic discrimination and poor leadership. He accused officials of turning a blind eye to socio-economic problems such as drug trafficking, human trafficking or poor infrastructure and instead devoting their energy to paperwork, fines and bribes. Quoting a hackneyed Communist slogan, Seng charged that Party cadres had a duty to ‘follow Hồ Chí Minh’s moral example’ and serve the people. The problem, however, was that state actors only had principles or laws (*nguyên lý*) but no love or affection (*tình*) for the people, which undermines their legitimacy in the eyes of large swaths of upland Vietnam’s multi-ethnic population.

Pastor Seng then contrasted this critique with church leaders who believe that God sees everything, therefore they must live accountable lives and follow Jesus’ example of ‘servant leadership’. Ironically, however, ambiguous accountability is in fact a controversy surrounding Seng’s ministry. He is revered by most of his congregation and local church leaders since he is such an effective political broker, and his church’s outreach activities are widely acknowledged to have benefited poorer members of the community. Nonetheless, his unusually intimate relationship with local authorities has aroused suspicion (or perhaps jealousy) among other Christians further afield. For instance, a well-informed Hmong Christian outsider questioned how Seng was the first Hmong pastor in all of Vietnam to gain official permission to build a church, and takes issue with his proud demeanour, which is not fitting for church leaders. This outsider joked that it was no longer clear whether Seng was working for the church or the state – or perhaps both!

Another concern is that Seng is ostensibly the wealthiest Hmong Christian in the area, owning a large building complex that includes not only the church structure but also several homestay rooms and medicinal bathing rooms. Exactly how he accrued all this is subject to some speculation, as Seng himself acknowledges. When local authorities demanded to know his sources of wealth (perhaps for taxation purposes), Seng replied that he runs a successful business of rearing livestock, and asked whether they wanted the Hmong to stay poor, if they were so suspicious of anyone doing well for themselves? However, a non-Christian neighbour asserted that Seng also receives a significant regular income by administering and providing security for a large plot of nearby land on behalf of a private company. Seng never mentioned this seemingly important information when I asked about his livelihoods. Like other Christian elites, Seng is an astute businessman with multiple income streams; for example, while visiting and preaching to Hmong Christians further afield, he also takes the opportunity to bring and sell traditional clothing made by women in his family and village church.

In addition to a degree of state patronage, Seng has also managed to establish a partnership with a network of Korean missionaries, who visit the village occasionally and also funded international travel for Seng to accompany them on a mission trip to Laos. Trang, an ethnic Kinh (Vietnamese majority) missionary living nearby, has to work with Seng as the primary gatekeeper to the community she wants to minister to. She asserted that Seng had received large sums of money from Korean partners for the sole purpose of constructing churches, but that he had used part of it to fund his wider building complex, with the congregation unaware of the source of this investment. Trang accused Seng of ‘loving money’ and robbing God of glory by accepting the prestige for the good works he has done with Korean money. Then again, it should be noted that Trang also displayed some pejorative attitudes towards Hmong people and may well be unhappy being under the authority of an ethnic minority pastor.



## Upland politico-religious structures and leadership

Seng's story contains several interesting dynamics that can be understood within, and speak to, wider debates about power, brokerage and mimesis. One common theme from the anthropology of upland Southeast Asia is that leadership tends not to be hereditary but rather unstable and fluctuating, as exemplified by Leach's seminal *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954). Despite criticism for Leach's apparent disinterest with 'the facts' and moulding data to fit theory rather than vice versa (Robinne and Sadan 2007), researchers have found the concepts of 'social oscillation' and 'unstable equilibrium' to be compelling and salient beyond Kachin social structure. For example, Kirsch (1973) saw Leach's concepts as essentially typical of what he called 'hill tribe society' across Southeast Asia, but with a crucial amendment that aspiring elites are 'seeking for "ritual efficacy," "potency," "enhanced ritual status," or some such religiously defined goal, not seeking simply to possess "political power"' (1973: 3). He identified hosting communal religious feasts as the primary way for households to demonstrate their potency and gain social prestige, which increases status difference while evening out material inequalities through redistribution of food (cf. Firth 1929; Hayden 2016).

These insights are pertinent to contemporary developments among the Hmong in Vietnam, as Christian festivals/feasting can be seen as 'a major strategy used by ambitious individuals to achieve social, economic, and political advantages or dominance' (Hayden 2016: 4). However, Leach and Kirsch are both critiqued for paying insufficient attention to external political and economic factors that enable or constrain such local elite contestations (Nugent 1982; Steinmueller, this issue). Building on their work in his historical analysis of Vietnamese Central Highlander leadership, Salemink (2011) identifies external trade as a necessary condition by which 'big men' (cf. Rappaport 1968) from largely subsistence economies could afford to organise village feasts and ensure ritual primacy. Successful big men were well-travelled, multilingual, possessed extraordinary trade connections and displayed a high degree of commercial acumen that 'gave them leverage over their fellow villagers, but they were never absolute masters – not even within their own village or family' (Salemink 2011: 46).

Salemink did not extend his analysis to the Hmong, as relative newcomers to Southeast Asia's highlands for only 200 years or so (Culas and Michaud 1997; Lentz 2011), but many parallels could be drawn. A common observation of Hmong society has been its 'acephalous' (Culas 2004) or 'egalitarian' nature (Tapp 1989b), with a relative lack of social stratification – apart from the shaman role. Traditional Hmong worldviews are variously classified as animist, shamanist, pantheist (Tapp 1989a) or indeed not a religion at all (Borja 2014). In stark contrast to Christianity, the lack of consensus and wide regional variety in traditional belief 'does not give the Hmong any concern. They are interested in gaining practical benefits from the spirits, not in orthodoxy of belief' (Chindarsi 1976: 17). This pragmatic approach to religion is also evident in Borja's research on Hmong refugees in the USA, for whom 'the value of a religion's rituals lay in the degree to which they were efficacious' (2014: 259). In a spiritual landscape of both benevolent and malevolent forces, Hmong shamans traditionally play a unique mediating role in resolving practical problems (e.g. illness) and ensuring spiritual harmony in key life cycle ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. In contrast to Culas's claim that the shaman's spiritual efficacy 'confers upon him no superior status, no political role' (2004: 102), my research findings support Corlin's allusions to the intimate connection between religious and political leadership:

foreigners and officials are considered 'strange' and unpredictable just like the spirits; therefore the person best equipped to deal with these capricious powers is the shaman. In a recent study of a Hmong commune in Yen Bai province [Vietnam], it was found that all Communist Party cadres and ex-cadres were simultaneously shamans! (2004: 304)

Corlin's revealing observation illuminates why ethnic Hmong cadres were particularly hostile to Christianity, going 'above and beyond' central government edicts by taking the law into their own hands in their brutal attempts to stop conversions (Reimer 2011). While ethnic Kinh officials regard Christianity with suspicion as a threat to social stability and possibly a plot of 'hostile forces' (Ngô 2016; this issue), Hmong officials additionally recognise the personal threat to their authority within the Hmong community, since their legitimacy is often bolstered by their role within the traditional religious system. For example, Hà Giang is the home province of the prestigious *VŨ* family, who descended from the so-called 'Mèo kings', several of whom now hold prominent local and national government positions after aligning with the Communist Party during the Indochina wars (Lee 2015). These state-sponsored 'big men' strongly opposed Hmong Christianity and promoted especially heavy-handed religious repression (cf. D. B. *VŨ* 2005), resulting in Hà Giang having probably the lowest Christian percentage of its Hmong population out of any province (as new converts soon migrated to other parts of Vietnam or even abroad). Such antagonisms are of course also fuelled by the Christian demonisation of traditional Hmong culture and spirits. Hmong Christians were dismayed at how severely their ethnic comrades persecuted them, but this should not come as a surprise since Hmong history is in fact rife with intra-ethnic conflict and power struggles (Lee 2015).

### Characteristics and dynamics of highland elites

Historian Mai Na Lee (2015) has developed a useful model for recognising the dynamic relationships between Hmong local elites and state actors. Researching Hmong leadership during rebellions and peacetime within French Indochina, she observes a cycle between two types of chiefs: the prophet or messianic leader who rejects the state and the state-backed secular political broker. After messianic revolts against French colonial exploitation were invariably defeated, the Hmong would temporarily accept a political broker as leader, but in times of political or economy distress the broker would be overthrown by a new millenarian prophet who directly opposed the state (2015: 26). Although Lee does not make this connection, her cyclical leadership pattern clearly evokes Leach's 'social oscillation' between a *gumsa*-esque autocratic secular broker chief and the *gumlao*-esque millenarian leader – recall that in Kachin language, *gumlao* literally means 'rebellion' (Robinne and Sadan 2007).

Whereas the messianic leader's legitimacy came from religious authority and charismatic (often supernatural) powers, the political broker relies primarily on state patronage for 'legal-rational' authority, in terms of Weberian ideal types. Knowledge of the state language and literacy is essential for the political broker to negotiate agreements with the state; his challenge is 'to balance Hmong aspirations to be free and the state's desire to extract goods and services as well as impose assimilation' (Lee 2015: 33). Hmong Christianisation in Vietnam does contain the potential for millenarian,

rebellious elements (Rumsby 2018). However, most church elites who initially started their leadership in the fires of persecution, promoting ‘illegal’ activities (such as unregistered church gatherings) and evading local authorities, are gradually adapting their role to resemble the *gumsa*-esque political broker: negotiating with, submitting to, and occasionally even gaining legitimacy from, the state. The most potent pastors like Seng also exhibit some aspects of Lee’s messianic leadership such as impressive charisma and supernatural ability. Yet more commonly displayed by other, less enigmatic pastors of smaller congregations were the ‘secular’ brokerage credentials: fluency and literacy in the state (Vietnamese) language, familiarity with legal and bureaucratic structures, strong negotiating skills and, sometimes, state patronage.

The majority of Hmong pastors and church leaders will not reach the levels of political influence as Pastor Seng. In general, older leaders I interviewed struggle to gain the acceptance of hostile local authorities, haven’t developed the same external Christian networks and don’t have much experience or interest in new business opportunities. Nevertheless, most of them share the same ‘pioneering ethos’ (Petit 2015) as exhibited by Seng in his ambitious attempts to forge partnerships with external partners, push the boundaries of his influence and occasionally risk running into conflict with local authorities. In addition to his theology training, Seng’s striking self-confidence sets him apart from other Hmong, who expressed internalised lowlands discourses about their own ‘backwardness’ and ethnic inferiority (Ngô 2016). In stark contrast, Seng’s confidence (which is also interpreted negatively by some as pride) is built on previous successes but is also characteristic of a Pentecostal transformation of subjectivity ‘from seeing oneself as a victim to seeing oneself as a victor’ (Freeman 2012: 12).

So in some ways pastors and church leaders like Seng are unique ‘figures of modernity’ (Barker *et al.* 2014), harbingers of change in their communities. On the other hand, an anthropological perspective of elites must also account for the agency of non-elites in consciously or unconsciously attributing power to elites (Salverda and Skovgaard-Smith 2018). Seng is conscious of this dynamic and makes a point of photographically documenting and publicising his role in social outreach programmes and meetings with prestigious foreign missionaries on social media. Yet there is also a sense in which Seng embodies and represents the desire for ‘progress’ that is already embedded within the wider Hmong population (Rumsby 2021), as in other parts of Southeast Asia (High 2014; Li 2014). In their extensive investigations into Hmong efforts to adapt to change in upland Vietnam, Turner *et al.* (2015) see more ‘creative adaptation’ in the way by which Hmong women and men do not embrace state visions of ‘market modernity’ wholesale, but rather selectively engage with what they see as advantageous. One reason why Christian leaders are able to become local elites is that their legitimacy of spiritual and financial success are the very same desires of many within their congregations, who may hold a similar ‘pioneering ethos’ but lack the connections with which to tap into external potency.

## Christian networks as competing patrons

Contrary to popular stereotypes of the independent, anarchic uplander, history reveals many cases of Hmong interaction with lowland powers. According to Lee, ‘while the Hmong yearn for independence, the legitimacy of their leaders has [historically] rested largely on outside patronage’ (2015: 12). To add a new variation, however, in Vietnam

there are now alternative sources of legitimacy, wealth and power to the state in the form of national and international external Christian networks. It should be stressed that the overwhelming majority of Hmong Christians in Vietnam have never interacted with foreign missionaries, and most converted in a context of relative isolation from wider Christian networks: it took Hmong believers several years to even make initial contact with the ethnic Kinh Protestant church in Hanoi in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, more recently, with the relaxation of visa restrictions for foreign workers and the expansion of denominational networks in the Northern highlands, well-placed Hmong Christians like Seng have been able to access alternative sources of finance, information and business opportunities through transnational Christian networks.

One crucial manifestation of this is seen through education pathways. For Hmong Christians who are unable to access a government scholarship due to religious discrimination, the costs of both tuition and living expenses in a big city like Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City are totally unviable for an average Hmong income. However, a number of alternative support options have now emerged for Christian students, including inner-city Bible schools that allow ethnic minority students to stay in halls of residence for a very low (or no) rent, as well as free English language lessons taught by foreign Christians to 'empower' them in the face of ethnic discrimination. While the majority come to study theology, they learn a lot more than the Bible as they are exposed to a fully marketised, consumer-oriented environment with new ways of thinking, earning a living and monetarised moral economies (Truitt 2013) – one student described it as 'like opening up my mind to a new world'. The content of 'theology' classes includes teaching on family budgeting, basic accounting and how to start a business: both students and rural Hmong pastors attend Christian meetings in the city and return to pass on the teaching to their congregations. Meeting and networking with foreigners opens up other economic opportunities such as promoting tourism in home villages.

National and transnational Christian networks can have a significant developmental impact, however access to these potential benefits is unequal. Officially recognised denominations are better funded and have more freedom to facilitate networks than smaller, unregistered church groups. Even those from extremely remote and poor provinces come to study at urban Bible schools, but a clear majority of theology students are male. Crucially, the primary beneficiaries of most financial and information flows are either church leaders or aspiring church leaders. This often leads to pastors being the most well-connected, and sometimes the wealthiest people in their Christian communities – the new 'big men' of upland Vietnam.

Wells-Dang (2007) highlights the demand of religious NGOs for local partners: since the total number of Vietnamese Protestants is fairly low, the several international Protestant groups are 'tripping over themselves to work with them' (2007: 420). While religious investment is getting easier in big cities, international Christian organisations have limited direct access to remote highland areas, due to greater state restrictions or controls on the activity of religious NGOs there. Instead, these new patrons must rely on Hmong Christian elites to channel their influence into local communities, in a similar role to Lewis and Mosse's 'development brokers' who 'operat[e] at the "interfaces" of different worldviews and knowledge systems' by 'negotiating roles, relationships, and representations ... constantly creating interest and making real ... against the ever-present threat of fragmentation' (2006: 10, 16). Brokers act in their own interests and generate value by helping disparate others to establish and facilitate exchanges, thriving in 'spaces where a weak state cannot impose its own rationality on a recalcitrant local'

(McKay and Perez 2019: 1906). Although most observers would not describe Vietnam as a weak state, its territorial reach and influence among remote Hmong villages is considerably reduced (Turner *et al.* 2015).

While Lewis and Mosse are specifically concerned with the local actors employed or funded by NGOs, Hmong pastors face comparable tasks in representing the local populations, expressing their 'needs' and translating for external Christian missionary donors (Tomalin 2020). As with state patronage, this gives some Hmong pastors and evangelists considerable authority as spokesmen, and in the best-case scenario they may even be able to select or play off competing patrons. Seng's story illustrates how local elites attract external capital and business prospects to consolidate legitimacy from local communities while accumulating wealth for themselves. They must balance their own interests with the agendas of various patrons – be it Vietnamese local authorities who want to increase surveillance of religious activities, or foreign Christian missionaries with strings attached to funding. However, there is a fine line between collaboration and compromise, and those like Seng who are seen to have 'crossed over' to the state side may lose legitimacy in the eyes of his patrons and/or clients in the long run.

## Mimesis

A final interesting feature of Hmong Christian elite activity is the way state technologies of governance and displays of power are mimicked or adapted, as seen in Seng's public Christian festival, which imitated prestigious government events. Examples from other fieldwork sites included churches copying state 'legibility' technologies by creating their own 'poverty lists' of neighbouring communities before providing aid (Rumsby 2021), in a remarkably similar manner to state poverty-reduction scheme procedures (Chaudhry 2016). Hmong Christians are not the only religious group in Vietnam who compete with state welfare for local moral authority 'in ways that resemble the state's governing approach through a combination of moral discourses and social control' (Nguyen and Chen 2017: 241). While Nguyen and Chen attribute this to a wider 'welfare socialisation' agenda, which is promoted by state actors, this mimicry also has the potential to undermine state authority:

Various religious development initiatives are undertaken to counter, subvert, disrupt, or reconfigure state power. Other initiatives are undertaken as part of a kind of shadow or parallel state which operates alongside the formally recognised one, and thereby construct a kind of religious counter-public. (Fountain *et al.* 2015: 24)

Southeast Asian studies is littered with historical and contemporary examples of highland elites engaging in mimetic practices to improve negotiating positions with lowland powers (Jonsson 2010; Tappe 2018), with the aim of 'absorbing the outside and changing world in order to stay the same' (Taussig 1993: 131) as opposed to assimilation. Mimesis can be interpreted as resistance but also as a mode of 'productive appropriation', whereby peripheral people can 'recreat[e] their own identities and even enhance some forms of relatively autonomous "indigenous" political power' (Ladwig and Roque 2018: 4). Many upland Southeast Asian peoples have embraced Christianity as 'a powerful alternate, and to some degree oppositional, modernity' (Scott 2009: 319)

to retain local distinctiveness and autonomy in the face of lowlands state assimilation attempts. Nevertheless, this article indicates that Christian appropriation, from an international source, is not mutually exclusive with simultaneous mimetic engagements with the nation-state.

## Conclusion

This article highlights the profound impact of Hmong Christianisation on the everyday political economy of Vietnam's Northern highlands, specifically through local elite contestation. By usurping the power of traditional Hmong elites, many younger Christian leaders have established themselves as new political brokers, representing their community's interests to local (and sometimes even central) governing bodies in both confrontational and cooperative exchanges. What's more, through extensive travel abroad and to the big cities for ostensibly religious study and meetings, Christian elites may also become 'development brokers' (Lewis and Mosse 2006) for powerful external religious networks who can provide knowledge, finances and prestige. These networks function as new sources of potency and can become alternative 'patrons' to the state.

Most pastors complain that the church tithes are too small for them to take a salary from, so instead they utilise their education, experience and external contacts to accumulate wealth through mundane business opportunities – although this may be presented to their congregations in the more romantic language of 'God's blessing'. The next generation of leaders who attend Bible schools in the cities are returning home with bigger ambitions of influencing the political economy of their rural communities when they return. Younger pastors like Seng are extremely busy, engaged in a flurry of economic and religious activities that are at a marked disjuncture from the seasonal pattern of Hmong traditional livelihoods. While this busyness was probably quite bewildering to older Hmong farmers, younger Christian elites are modelling a new entrepreneurial lifestyle at an accelerated pace of life; this is one way in which capitalist expansion into the highlands is felt at the everyday level (Scheer 2017).

The extent to which benefits are redistributed or accumulated by Hmong pastors and church leaders varies, but their brokerage tends to have at least some positive impacts for Hmong Christian communities who have previously faced marginalisation due to ethnic and religious discrimination. Seng has clearly done very well for himself – indeed, his financial success and external networks only add to his spiritual authority and political legitimacy at a local level. Other Christian villagers I interviewed considered the brokerage, advocacy and advice of pastors to be positive for the community and expressed little concern about the unequal distribution of improvements; even Seng's questionable use of external resources was most alarming for outsiders, rather than locals.


Hmong church leaders resemble the 'big men' of other studies of Southeast Asia's highlands who demonstrate their ritual primacy through hosting ritual feasts, political authority through dealing with external state powers and economic potency through external networks. This attracts the loyalty of other villagers, who recognise their ability to draw in external power and channel it. Their combination of religious and political legitimacy enables ambitious Hmong Christian pioneers to mobilise and coordinate grassroots development activities to a level that some local officials admit is beyond their ability. Pastors can persuade villagers to change their lifestyles and contribute time, labour and money to communal initiatives (Rumsby 2021) – in stark contrast to

the state-led development schemes that are often ignored or mistrusted by marginalised Hmong communities (Bonnin and Turner 2014).

Some local cadres attempt to co-opt positive Christian contributions to society, while others see state mimesis as a rival challenge and are threatened by church attempts to govern. Perhaps the most poignant threat they pose is an ideological one. Even if they don't air their criticisms publicly, Vietnam's citizens are generally well aware of government rent-seeking and nepotism at almost every level (Gainsborough 2010). Christian elites like Seng preach an alternative model of 'servant leadership', which is not always realised in practice but nevertheless implicitly critiques the hypocrisy of Party morality propaganda. However, as with the historical 'big men' of Southeast Asia, upland potency is unstable and Seng does not have a monopoly on potency. Wider scholarship would suggest that the rapid rise of this generation of Hmong pastors to political power will not go unchallenged, whether from state actors or a younger generation of aspiring local leaders.

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## Les élites chrétiennes Hmong – courtiers politique et de développement: compétition, coopération et mimésis dans les hauts plateaux du Vietnam

Cet article se concentre sur le rôle des nouveaux chefs religieux Hmong. Ceux-ci sont principalement des jeunes hommes – qui ont joué un rôle important dans la diffusion du christianisme protestant sur les hauts plateaux du Vietnam – au cours des trente dernières années. Ces pasteurs et évangélistes ont directement remis en question l'autorité des élites locales hmong

précédemment établies, dont la légitimité reposait sur l'autorité religieuse traditionnelle et/ou le patronage de l'État, provoquant au passage d'importants conflits sociaux. Certains nouveaux pionniers chrétiens ont acquis le statut d'élite locale en tant que courtiers en politique et en développement pour leur communauté, bénéficiant d'une puissante combinaison d'autorité spirituelle, de réseaux externes solides et de succès financier. Par conséquent, les réseaux religieux internationaux peuvent fonctionner comme des mécènes alternatifs à l'État pour les élites chrétiennes Hmong bien placées, dans lesquels elles peuvent puiser et redistribuer à leurs communautés – à des degrés divers. La mise en contexte de ces dynamiques de leadership dans le cadre d'une recherche anthropologique plus large sur les hautes terres d'Asie du Sud-Est affirme « l'éthique de pionnier » des élites locales qui défient, respectent ou imitent les formes de gouvernance de l'État dans leurs tentatives d'attirer et de canaliser la puissance extérieure. Cela met en évidence le degré d'espace de manoeuvre politique dont disposent les acteurs non étatiques dans un État supposé autoritaire. Elle révèle également les tensions et controverses permanentes auxquelles les pasteurs sont confrontés dans la négociation de relations ambiguës avec de puissantes forces extérieures.

**Mots-clés** courtage, conflit, ethnicité, légitimité, religion