

The Art of Not Being Scripted So Much

The Politics of Writing Hmong Language(s)¹

Jean Michaud

This article discusses the persistent absence of a consensus on a script for the language of the Hmong, a kinship-based society of 5 million spread over the uplands of Southwest China and northern Indochina, with a vigorous diaspora in the West. In search of an explanation for this unusual situation, this article proposes a political reading inspired by James C. Scott's 2009 book *The Art of Not Being Governed*. A particular focus is put on Scott's claim of tactical rejection of literacy among upland groups of Asia. To set the scene, the case of the Hmong is briefly exposed before detailing the successive appearance of orthographies for their language(s) over one century. It is then argued that the lack of consensus on a common writing system might be a reflection of deeper political motives rather than merely the result of historical processes.

Anthropologists and linguists have long noted that it is common for stateless, kinship-based societies such as the Hmong to shape neither their own script nor borrow someone else's (Goody 1968). Here, the twist is that while the Hmong as a group have not adopted a common writing system, over two dozen scripts have been created for this language alone. In this paper I ask, Why is there such a proliferation of scripts, and how could such a lack of agreement on a common orthography in a relatively small society of 5 million speakers be explained?

Over the past century, Hmong scripts have spanned syllabaries crafted by Christian missionaries, to cryptic symbols divinely bestowed on messianic leaders, to schemes imposed by states to marshal people from the fringes into the Nation. If we focus on the use of scripts in contemporary websites and blogs, one such script, the Romanized Popular Alphabet, could be argued to be used near universally nowadays. While this assertion has traction, I argue that it is above all reflective of the instrumentalization of writing by segments of a Western-educated Hmong elite. In comparison, the majority of Hmong, mostly living as farmers in Asia, are unlikely to share this agenda. In my years of fieldwork visits to mountain hamlets in Asia, where the vast majority of Hmong live, I have seen evidence of a different narrative: the Hmong language there is still overwhelmingly embedded in oral tradition, and a common

writing system appears to be of little interest to the majority of its speakers (Thao 2006)—outside very specific moments of rebellious crises, a point I return to later.

I am not suggesting that the Hmong situation is monolithic; on the contrary, it is multifarious, as we will see. I am also not advocating that it is unique. Abundant research shows that the number of orthographies made for a minority language tends to be proportionate to the number of nations among whose borders the group is split and/or the number of different colonial or missionary groups that have influenced it. For instance, Pohnpeian, a language spoken by only 40,000 people from Micronesia with a primarily oral tradition, has undergone many changes to its orthography due to missionizing and colonization by Germans, Japanese, and North Americans, as well as local disputes involving dialect representation (Rehg 1998). This is also common among other Pacific languages like Marshallese and Yapese. Another good example is Romani, which is an almost entirely oral language with at least 11 orthographies in use across Eurasia (Matras 1999).

In search of an explanation for Hmong language in particular, this article is an attempt at a specific reading inspired by the work of James C. Scott (2009), while also being aware of his critics. I first briefly outline Scott's thesis regarding state evasion, in particular the tactical rejection of literacy. In the next section ("James C. Scott's Proposition, in Short"), I discuss the situation of the Hmong before detailing the successive appearance of orthographies for their language(s). I then explore in the rest of the article the idea that a lack of consensus regarding a common writing system might be a reflection of cultural agency rather than being merely the random outcome of historical processes.

To make my position as explicit as I can, I am a white male from French Canadian extraction (in my case, Québécois). The claims that I make in this piece are based on yearly visits and ethnographic fieldwork with Hmong in the Southeast Asian

1. This title borrows from both James C. Scott's (2009) book title (*The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*) and a conference given in 1978 by Michel Foucault in which he discussed *l'art de n'être pas tellement gouverné*, translated by Judith Butler (2002) as "the art of not being governed quite so much." This article continues a series of reflections first published in my article "What's (Written) History for? On James C. Scott's Zomia, Especially Chapter 6½" in *Anthropology Today* (2017). That article and this one are thus connected and can be read together.

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Massif: in Thailand using Thai language during my doctoral research in 1991–1993 and regularly since then; in Vietnam yearly from 1995 to the present; and in China biennially from 2009 to the present, with the assistance of Hmong-English interpreters or by myself. In this paper, I step back a certain distance in scale, and not being an insider is definitely one reason for this choice. Another relates to the academic and conceptual nature of my project—as opposed to activism or problem-solving. My aim is not to exhaust the topic and come to definitive answers, as this would be unrealistic at best. Instead, as I stress in the conclusion, I hope to energize a debate among scholars and interested parties.

James C. Scott's Proposition, in Short

In his 2009 book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, political scientist James C. Scott (2009) cast light on the neglected part of high Asia extending eastward from Tibet toward mainland Southeast Asia. This is what I call the Southeast Asian Massif, namely, the highlands in the southeastern portion of the Asian landmass (Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain 2016). Borrowing from Willem van Schendel (2002), Scott called this high area Zomia. Scott's provocative book has had a swift impact on scholarly debates regarding this highland region and beyond.²

Scott's work offers an insightful template for how one can think critically about the junction between state evasion and aliteracy. With a gaze spanning centuries, Scott reads the gradual peopling of these highlands in terms of members of freshly subjugated egalitarian societies rejecting their domination and becoming mobile with a will to escape "being governed." Like Pierre Clastres (1977) before him, Scott further stresses that these groups sought to ensure that the very notion of "the state" and its associated inegalitarian social systems did not emerge from within. To Scott, over time, these isolated Asian highlands thus became a major "zone of refuge" from domination (2009:143), where populations hid while astutely practicing forms of nonconfiscable "escape agriculture" based on nomadism, swiddening, and root crops (2009:187). Ultimately, when the increasing pace of territorial predation in upland Asia by lowland states caught up, Scott suggests that Zomia became "the last great enclosure" the world has known (2009:4), one in which the "friction of terrain" was gradually and irrevocably eroded by the persistent use of state- and market-led "distance demolishing technologies" such as roads, railways, dams, and phone and satellite coverage, all compounded by mass migration from the overcrowded lowlands (2009:40, 11).

2. The numbers speak for themselves: Scott's book has been cited over 4,000 times in 11 years, compared to a total of 4,150 citations for Leach's iconic *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954; Google Scholar, March 15, 2020).

"Orality, Writing, and Texts"

Of central interest to my contention—that the Hmong language in Asia is still overwhelmingly embedded in oral tradition and that a common writing system is not a priority for the vast majority of its speakers—is Scott's chapter 6½, "Orality, Writing, and Texts." In this chapter, Scott (2009:220) intriguingly proposes that there is more to nonliteracy among kinship-based societies than is commonly thought. He asks, "What if many peoples, on a long view, are not *preliterate*, but . . . *postliterate*? . . . What if, to raise the most radical possibility, there was an active or strategic dimension to this abandonment of the world of texts and literacy?" Scott stresses that the historical absence of literacy in a society could actually result from refusal or dismissal rather than "civilizational deficiency." His argument is that the current orality of such societies might not mark the highest degree of social complexity they have ever reached, but instead could be the result of a shift from literacy and possibly hierarchized forms of social organization back to nonliteracy and egalitarianism.

Historically, in Asian societies text was used mainly by priests, monks, and scribes to record scripture, history, and tax rolls in monastic books, annals, royal records, and the like. It was not used by, nor even *of use to* swiddeners and peasants. Accordingly, in such agrarian societies, Scott ponders how much "history" do people really need or even want (2009:235)? This point seems especially valid when a group has little possibility of legitimizing a long genealogy, of ensuring a lasting grip on land and resources due to the state's "environmental rule" (McElwee 2016), or of imposing an antecedece of land rights.

Expanding laterally, Scott goes on to underline a number of functional connections between the absence of text and political plasticity. He wonders whether oral tradition can be compared to written tradition more or less like swiddening can be compared to wet-rice agriculture (see fig. 1), or small nomadic groups to concentrated sedentarized societies. "[Oral traditions permit] a strategic and interested readjustment of . . . a group history. . . . As the different oral traditions drift imperceptibly apart, there can be no reference point—which a shared written text would provide—by which to gauge how far and in what ways each tradition had diverged from the once common account" (2009:230; cf. Goody and Watt 1963).

Scott (2009:235; my addition in brackets) then encapsulates his core argument in a single hypothesis: "Relatively powerless hill peoples . . . may well find it to their advantage to avoid written traditions and fixed texts, or even to abandon them altogether, in order to maximize their room for cultural [and political] maneuver."

About the Hmong

The Hmong are one of several Asian upland societies Scott recruits to make his case, mentioning them dozens of times in



Figure 1. Hmong Leng wet-rice farming in a characteristic Zomian landscape. San Sả Hò Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, Vietnam, June 2010. (Source: J. Michaud.)

his book. First, who are the Hmong and why do they matter to the Zomia thesis? And what could the story of their writing systems tell us about their politics and aspirations?³

As Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp (2010) explain, the Hmong are a kinship-based society located chiefly in the high borderlands between Southwest China (mostly in the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan) and northern mainland Southeast Asia (in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma; see fig. 2). Many Hmong in China are believed to have been settled for

centuries, while others practiced semi-nomadism and swiddening until they were sedentarized over the course of the twentieth century (Tapp 2001). A vast majority are animists (with Christian conversion on the rise) and continue to live off the land, relying on a household-based subsistence economy. In recent years cash cropping has grown sharply, and increasing numbers have added wage work to their livelihoods portfolio or moved to settle in urban areas (Turner, Bonnín, and Michaud 2015).

Hmong is an autonym, but in China, where over 60% live, this name is not acknowledged as an official “minority nationality” label (*shaoshu minzu*, 少数民族). In a convoluted fashion typical of 1950s communist scientism, the Chinese state has unilaterally decided to cluster the “raw” peoples claiming to be Hmong into the larger Miao nationality (*Miáo Zú*, 苗族), aggregating four different linguistic groups under the same label (Fiskesjö 1999; Mortensen 2017; Mullaney 2011; Niederer 2004; Tapp 2001). While there are no definitive figures,

3. Each Asian country in which Hmong live has its own way(s) of writing this ethnonym. Like Lee and Tapp (2010) I use “Hmong” as a compromise for harmony with the international literature on this group. Lately, “Mong” (“[H]Mong”) has also become popular, and members of the group who took refuge in the West at the end of the Second Indochina War have contributed to promoting the Romanized Popular Alphabet versions: “Hmoob”/“Moob.”



Figure 2. Approximate location of Hmong in Asia. (Source: J. Michaud in Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015:21.)

an educated guess suggests that of the 9.5 million Miao registered in the 2010 China national census (see table 1), about one-third self-identify as Hmong (Lee and Tapp 2010:1; Lemoine 2005).

If James Scott brings up the Hmong to support his thesis, it is because there are well-documented stories of a lost or stolen script in Hmong mythology (Cooper 1984; Enwall 1994a:47–56; Hudspeth 1937; Ma and Jin 1983 in Cheung 2012:149; Scheuzger 1966; Tapp 1989b:124–172, 2001:445), including an endearing story of Hmong in China having to eat all their books, resulting in them losing literacy but acquiring an excellent memory (Enwall 1994a:52–53, 2008:156–157; Tapp 2010b:96). While this myth of a lost script, found also among the Akha, Lahu, Wa, Karen, Khmu, Mien, and Chin, for instance (Kelly 2018), may at times be taken literally by over-enthusiastic readers, the fact remains that no written document in any Asian archive has emerged that could irrefutably be attributed to the Hmong (see Enwall 1994a:59–89 for a review of the historical texts; Schein 1986:79). Furthermore, no Hmong text in an endogenous script has been noted by any Western witness since the beginning of their observations in situ about 150 years ago. This does not definitely disprove that one or several ancient endogenous, borrowed, or adapted Hmong scripts might have existed, for instance, of a messianic nature, as we will see; it simply does not prove it, either.

Early Enthusiasm: Missionary Intent and Colonial Reasoning

The absence of a script was so striking to Westerners upon first encountering Hmong in the late nineteenth century that these outsiders made devising ways of writing the language their first task. Typically among these outsiders were rival Christian missionaries heading upstream from the lowlands of India, China, and Mainland Southeast Asia who did not care to cooperate with each other much—each presumably claiming to hold the best plan to reach God. Consequently, each designed their own largely incompatible Hmong scripts. The overall goals of these missionary groups were to relate, influence from within, and convert, which could all be read as a charade for them acting as a spearhead for the state to gain political control serving the greater colonial/imperial cause (Michaud 2007; Scott 1998; Tuck 1987).

The Hmong script pioneer appears to have been the French Catholic missionary Paul Vial of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP), stationed in eastern Yunnan at the turn of the twentieth century. Following a short encounter in 1896 with a few Hmong families in central Yunnan, in 1908 Vial published a 15-page dictionary (1908) of the “Miaotse” language using an alphabet based on French pronunciation, yet such a brief work could not offer a firm base to build on and it was soon forgotten. In 1912 Henri D’Ollone, a French explorer, proposed a Miao dictionary (1912) following encounters he had in southern Yunnan with people likely to be Hmong, though it has been suggested that the sole informant he relied on may have made up words entirely (Enwall 2008:158). Soon after, Catholic priest François-Marie Savina also with the MEP but based primarily in the north of present-day Vietnam, in 1916 devised his own French-centric romanization in a hefty 245-page dictionary and grammar (Savina 1916; see fig. 3) for those he called “Miao” while acknowledging their autonym Hmong. Savina combined his alphabet with features from the seventeenth-century romanization of Vietnamese known as *quốc ngữ* (the national language), which has the merit of taking tones into account. Then, in 1939, Homera Homer-Dixon, working with the Protestant Bible School in Vietnam, refurbished the Savina script by adding yet more features from *quốc ngữ*.

Table 1. Approximate number of Hmong worldwide based on national censuses when available

	Number of Hmong	%
China (2005)	3,000,000	61
Vietnam (2009)	1,068,189	22
Laos (2005)	451,946	9
Thailand (2015)	155,649	3
Burma	?	?
Diaspora (2010)	270,000	5
Total	4,945,784	100

Source. Michaud, Ruscheweyh, and Swain (2016:177–179).

DICTIONNAIRE MIAO-TSEU-FRANÇAIS

A

- a.** Faire ; travailler (rare, usité dans les chants seulement.) Cf. *wa*.
- a-já.** Interjection désignant la colère, l'impatience, le mécontentement, le mépris, le refus, l'indignation.
- á.** Clair, lumineux.
wa chí —, *wa kàng* —, éclairer, illuminer, faire clair. [syn. *chí vó, kàng ndó*]. *Toùr tràu wa chí — mô kè*, allumer une torche pour éclairer la marche.
- á.** (Lò). Verre ; glace ; miroir ; carreau.
Lò — cháo, lò cháo —, glace ; miroir. *Lò — hò*, petite boîte servant ordinairement de tabatière aux indigènes, et munie d'une glace à l'intérieur. *Sây* —, se mirer dans une glace. *Kháo tróng xáo* —, porte vitrée. *Kháo lóng xang jèng xáo* —, fenêtre vitrée. *Ndhao — tràu mè sì hờr*, poser un verre de montre.
- á.** Terre. V. *áng*.
— *twá*, argile. *Lò háng* —, *lò hờr* —, bourbier, flaque d'eau, mare.
- Póur* —, espèce de roseau qui croît dans les bourbiers.
- á-hiu.** Terme usité pour appeler les porcs.
- á.** Amer.
— —, — — *li*, — — *lè*, — — *húng*, très amer. *Njwa* —, pousses de bambou amères. *Syong* —, espèce de bambou. *Zràu* —, sorte de pissenlit (*Taraxacum corniculatum*). *Txi pò* —, espèce de mûre sauvage amère. (Ce terme s'ajoute à un grand nombre de noms de plantes, de fruits.)
- á.** Réponse de mécontentement, de colère.
- áng.** (Lò). [Ch. 鞍 *ngàn*]. Selle.
Lò — nèng, selle de cheval. *Lò — ndông*, selle en bois. *Lò — tóur nhó tít*, selle en cuir de buffle.
- áng.** Terre ; boue, fange, bourbe.
Páo —, motte de terre. *Láy páo* —, lancer une motte de terre. *Lò* —, souillé, taché, sali par la boue ; crotté. *Lò — hò sí*, tout couvert de

xvi, 2

Figure 3. First page of F.-M. Savina's dictionary (1916:1).

Working in the first half of the twentieth century, China Inland Mission Protestant missionaries Samuel Pollard and Maurice Hutton also designed writing systems. However, it later became clear that most of the Chinese Miao groups for whom Pollard and Hutton produced scripts were not actually Hmong but A-Hmao and Hmu (Enwall 2008:158–159). Two exceptions were the use of the Pollard script for Hmong in Sichuan (Chuan [River] Miao) starting in 1915 through the 1930s (Enwall 1994a:140–146, 1994b:70–84) and the use of Hutton's National Phonetic Script for the Hmong dialect Ge (Keh Deo) in books printed in 1937 (Enwall 1994a:158–160).

In 1953, linguist William Smalley and Protestant pastor Linwood Barney, in Thailand with the American Bible Society, launched the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), a simple Latin-based system with a convenient way of representing the eight tones of Hmong.⁴ Inextricably linked to Christian conversion cum political vying in Southeast Asia in the early days of the so-called Vietnam War, RPA became an important communication vector within neighboring Laos among (largely Catholic) anti-communist Hmong forces for the duration of the Second Indochina War (1954–1975). Since Laos is the

4. G. Linwood Barney and William A. Smalley, 1953, "Third report on Meo (Miao): orthography and grammar" (mimeograph).

country of origin for most Hmong who took refuge in the West after the 1975 communist victories (Downing and Olney 1982), many of the Hmong refugees already acquainted with the RPA were soon circulating it among the diaspora.⁵ Being typewriter- and later computer-compatible, the RPA system became prevalent among American Hmong (a population of 260,000 in 2010). The RPA script (see a sample in fig. 4) is now used by American Hmong to communicate with each other and with Hmong from Laos resettled in France, Australia, and beyond, contributing greatly to the international visibility and viability of RPA.

In the 1960s, French Roman Catholic missionary Yves Bertrais (1964), who had actually developed a prototype of the RPA script in the early 1950s (Tapp 2010a:89), and Ernest Heimbach (1966) from the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University each published a dictionary using the RPA but incorporating new diacritics and yet more letters. In parallel, Scottish missionary Doris Whitelock (1982 [1966–1968]), while in Thailand in 1966–1968, also worked from the RPA but inserted Thai- and Lao-based tone marks to produce handbooks in the White Hmong language.⁶

Finally, two Western scholars with no overt religious or political affiliation also tried their hand at script design. American linguist Thomas Lyman (1974) opted to create a romanization of his own for Green Hmong, with somewhat puzzling diacritics, publicized in his *Dictionary of Mong Njua* in 1974. While in 2013, French anthropologist Jacques Lemoine (see also 1972) issued a hefty manual, *Parlons (H)Mong* (Let's speak (H)Mong), adding new tone marks for yet another Latin-based approach suiting French pronunciation but also including a transcription in RPA for more convenient use by non-French speakers.

Endogenous Scripts: A Rebellious Affair

Concurrently, scripts were also stemming from within Hmong society. While this may appear to contradict my earlier statement regarding an absence of endogenous Hmong scripts, there is an explanation. Such endogenous scripts all appeared as part of passionate and brief outbreaks of Hmong messianic rebellions along with new rituals, songs, dress, and music (Lee and Tapp 2010:90). For the most part, these fated uprisings did not survive the repression that invariably stamped them into the ground. Opaque and not meant to be used by outsiders, the older of these scripts did not leave enough traces for

5. The post-1975 Hmong diaspora included approximately 110,000 individuals moving from Southeast Asia, mainly from Laos, to countries of the coalition that fought against the communist revolutions, most prominently the United States, France (including French Guyana), Australia, and Canada (Lee and Tapp 2010; Tapp 2010b).

6. White Hmong ("Hmoob Dawb" in RPA) and Green Hmong ("Hmoob Ntsuab," "Hmoob Leeg") are the two main subgroups of Hmong language in Southeast Asia. They are mutually intelligible to native speakers.

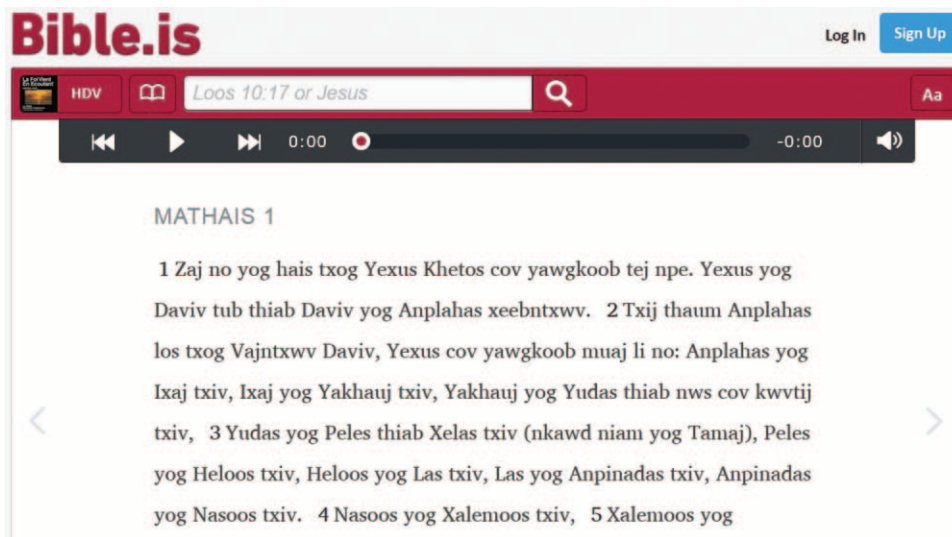


Figure 4. Sample from the Bible in Romanized Popular Alphabet. *Yexus* stands for Jesus. (Source: Bible.is, <https://live.bible.is/bible/MWVHHDV/MAT/1>.)

Western observers to work with when they started documenting Hmong orthographies in vivo. It is difficult to tell whether messianic scripts were the symptom of a more ancient, previously unnoticed writing culture, a consequence of cultural borrowings, or an indication of a worldview finding it hard to come to terms with external impositions as being anything through which to find internal coherence. What is undeniable, however, is that over the last century endogenous Hmong scripts have been devised and used in the course of messianic upheavals, underlining a connection between Hmong cosmology, literacy, and political action (Cheung 2012:148; Culas 2005; Lee 2015; Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990; Tapp 2015:307).⁷ In an intriguing mirror image of Western agency propped up by religious motives, messianic leaders used these new scripts as a means to unify their followers (see Déléage 2018). Duffy (2007:216) has documented eight such scripts arising since 1919, a conservative estimate given that messianic movements have not always been distinguished from common rebellions by outside observers.

One such writing system is the mysterious Sayabouri script (*Ntawv Puaj Txwm* in RPA). Believed to have been revealed centuries ago by the Hmong deity La Bi Mi Nu, this script is still in use by some US Hmong diaspora originally from Sayaburi Province in Laos (Smalley and Wimuttikosol 1998). Another script was created by Pa Chay Vue (*Paj Cai Vwj*, or Batchai), a famous Hmong messianic leader from Vietnam who was hunted by the French from the inception of his movement in 1918 until he was killed in Laos in 1921 (Lee 2015:95). But probably the most famous of the messianic scripts comes from

7. The possibility that a messiah might be attempting to revive the original “lost” Hmong script makes for a tempting hypothesis, as in Kelly (2018), and might be a promising lead to explain the resistance to accept a new universal script by Hmong subjects; such a hypothesis, however, clearly exceeds the scope of my discussion.

Shong Lue Yang (*Soob Lwj Yaj*), whose semi-syllabary system surfaced in 1959. Called *pahawh* in the vernacular, it has become known within Hmong society as the Mother of Writing or *Niam Ntawv* (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990; see also Ngô 2016; Ratliff 1996). As with other Hmong prophets, Shong Lue Yang claimed to have been taught this script over several years in the course of divine revelations.⁸ He stated that he was then ordered to teach it widely to help Hmong escape their lethal entanglement in the Laotian Civil War. Spreading the script during the 1960s, Yang was deemed a menace by various warring factions. With the intensification of political struggles, he was killed in 1971 (Tapp 2015:302). His *pahawh* script, however, continues to enjoy a long life: championed by devoted followers, it is the source of yet more Hmong scripts today across the diaspora, as we will see shortly.

Characteristically, the maintenance and resurgence of messianic scripts today appeal primarily to Hmong subgroups in the diaspora, and—much like the logic of their very appearance—are used chiefly for the purposes of activism, ethno-nationalism, or “to save Hmong civilization” (Lee 2015:xxii, 19).⁹

8. On this, Tapp (2010b:98, n. 168) is more prosaic: “Smalley considers carefully the evidence of external influences on Yaj Soob Lwj’s invention of the Pahaw system but concludes that it was most probably unaided genius. . . . By all events it was a fantastic achievement, and is the only alphabetic system in the world where the nuclear element is the vowel rather than the consonant (Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990).”

9. On the subject of Hmong ethno-nationalism, in a review Hmong American historian Nengher N. Vang (2015:10) writes: “[Mai Na Lee’s book *Dreams of the Hmong kingdom*] has successfully demonstrated that if the Hmong should ever aspire for sovereignty and their own great civilization, they must transcend petty clan divisions and discontinue their fights against each other as they vainly seek legitimacy from states or outside patronage. Rather, they must unite and have the courage to dream and to fight for the sovereignty of their own people and their own state.”

Thâuv Cẩm muỗx 8 shông cux zos thâuv Cẩm lênhx niêv, pos Mai Thị
 Cam trâus moz tso jik kaz jiz. Lênhx niêv tuk moz iz hnuz hnhar jux juk.
 Thâuv Cẩm couv tas ntour lớp 9 mak niêv trâus moz trâuv. Iz ciêz, pos
 Cam tsuv muk 2 jâuk tsêr yuỗx, muk đêz muỗx 40 cêik trâu tsêr kho moz
 Đa khoa tỉnh Quảng Trị liv trâuv. Chiê zôngx ziv mul lok, Cẩm 2 niêv tuz
 tsuv tso vax tsêr tsêr chiê muk thor nhoz khov trâu tsôngv box nhoz jê ntus
 cêr lox tsêr.

Figure 5. Sample of *Ntour Hmôngz* on the official Vietnamese radio channel online, Voice of Vietnam 2, September 17, 2018, <http://vov4.vov.vn/Mong/cmmongtruat513092018139201810mp3/nenhs-jong-uo-haux-luv-jong-hnuz-13-9-2018-c190-216819.aspx>.

State-Commissioned Scripts: Legibility on the Margins

A third source of Hmong orthographies is the state. In Asia, the aim of each country where Hmong live has been to better control and swiftly incorporate minority societies into the Nation (Duncan 2004; Michaud 2009b). In China, multiple authors mention forms of writing attributed to ancient Miao, but little evidence exists to prove that these refer to Hmong or even *Miao zu* languages as they are defined today (Culas and Michaud 1997:213; Enwall 2008:158). At any rate, the Chinese communist regime, faced with illiteracy in Chinese ideograms among its “minority nationalities,” was not willing to work with any possible scripts from before 1949 (Enwall 1995b, pt. 3, 2008:157; Mullaney 2011). Instead, the massive ethnic classification project of the 1950s, known in China as *Minzu Shibie*, the Nationality Identification, sponsored language surveys with the explicit intention of designing adapted writing systems for non-Han languages (Huang 2016). The aim of this project was to train language cadres and embed them in minority regions as intermediaries devoted to the Nation and the Party (Tapp 2001:95–98, 196–198). In the process, and despite Hmong not being recognized as a “nationality” in China, Hmong was acknowledged in 1956 as a sublanguage of Miao and worthy of its own script. This script was designed in 1958 in accordance with the official policy of using the Roman alphabet for the bulk of “minority nationality” languages in China as well as for *Hanyu Pinyin*, the official romanization of Mandarin (Enwall 1995b, 2008:163; Xiong and Cohen 2005; Zhou 1983).

The Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution (1957–1976) caused a 20-year lull in the study of ethnic distinction in China, including languages. Then in the post-Mao era, a renewed interest led to the renaissance of the state’s official Hmong script in 1982, called *dananshan* in Chinese (*ndeud hmongb* in the said Hmong script; Niederer 2002:353). Yet, as the linguist and specialist of Miao scripts Joakim Enwall (2008:155) remarks, “the success of a particular script depends both on its inherent effectiveness as a means of representing the

language and on the subsequent propagation. In the cases of [the Miao scripts in China], the second factor is by far the most important.” Enwall argues that despite intense state propaganda, a lack of practical efficiency has made for a low adoption rate of the official Miao writing systems in China, with perhaps a few tens of thousands of users in Yunnan and Guizhou by the end of the 1980s, out of a total Miao population then of over 7 million (Enwall 1995b:125).

In communist Vietnam, perhaps calculating that their own path to communism was distinctive, state linguists and ethnologists did not adopt the Chinese-made writings for groups straddling their common border like the Hmong, though they negotiated a similar ideological path to fashion their own romanization (Michaud 2009b). For Hmong (then known as *H’mông*), this was called *ntour hmôngz* (see fig. 5). This script was compatible with the national *quốc ngữ* while incorporating aspects of the RPA to represent Hmong’s eight tones (Bé 2006). As in China, this state-sponsored script was designed in the course of a large linguistic offensive on the frontier, in this case in the late 1970s following the country’s reunification. It was aimed at Hmong cultural brokers and never rooted itself in the general, largely rural Hmong population. It is still used by state media and some educated Hmong officials.¹⁰ Nowadays, in both China and Vietnam, state-sponsored scripts with shallow roots are losing to the RPA what little ground they may have gained before the advent of the internet (Enwall 1995a).

In Laos and Thailand, where Indian literary influences have prevailed for centuries, Hmong scripts were derived from the national Pali/Brahmi-based Thai and Lao scripts, adapted by borrowing elements from Doris Whitelock’s system mentioned above (Smalley 1994:245). There was not much of a

10. In 2016 in Sa Pa, Lào Cai Province, Hmong district officer Giàng Seo Gà showed me the proofs of a book on the history of Hmong culture in Vietnam he had just completed using *ntour hmôngz*, to be released by a state publishing house.

politics of language in Thailand, as mountain minority groups made up less than 1% of the country's population; they were simply expected to become literate in the national language (Leepreecha 2001; Smalley 1976, 1994; Tapp 1989b). In communist Laos, with a national minority population of over 40%, the political model from China and Vietnam was followed instead, while cultural proximity with Thailand simply imposed the Lao script on all groups (Bradley 2003). In both countries, these state-sponsored scripts remained marginal, and in Laos today, due in large part to the diaspora, the RPA is taking roots more firmly than anywhere else.

Thus, in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, Hmong scripts have materialized in four distinct and mutually unintelligible state-sponsored forms (though the Thai and Lao alphabets do overlap). None of these has thrived, and all appear to be in decline in this age of social media.

A Shift in Interest and Diasporic Agency

For Western and Asian powers, designing scripts for Hmong served the colonial project, Christian conversion, national integration, and the global struggle between communism and capitalism (Ngô 2016), explaining why even the Soviet Union got involved in Hmong linguistics (Enwall 2008:162). These interests receded sharply by the end of the colonial period and the conclusion of the revolutionary wars in 1975, bringing about the near end of new script production by these stakeholders and exposing the political agendas that had driven their earlier efforts.

Then the influx of Hmong refugees to the West after 1975 opened the field of script design to a new generation of endogenous actors. The arrival of Hmong in the United States, France, and Australia triggered public and academic curiosity, but most of all, it prompted an active interest among educated and second-generation diasporic Hmong in their origins, the wars that made their families flee, and their own language heritage (Downing and Olney 1982). One pioneer was Yang Dao, born in Vietnam and schooled in Laos in French, then on to earn a doctorate from the Sorbonne and settling in the West in 1975. Yang (1980) published a *Dictionnaire français-hmong blanc* using the RPA system. Soon after, other authors from within and around the diaspora came up with detailed lexicons and grammars, many self-published or launched online (e.g., Xiong 2006; Xiong, Xiong, and Xiong 1983).

Thanks to their shared origin in Laos and, for most, their common residence in the United States, many diasporic Hmong initially opted to use the RPA, though rarely unaltered. Yet, a few Hmong have also proposed their own experimental scripts, such as *Ntawv Txawj Vaag*, *Ntaw Nee Hmoo*, and *Qauv Ntaub Qauv Ntaw*, helped by easy access to the internet and the resulting exponential increase in global reach. Original script proposals are still emerging from within the diasporic community; for instance, at the Hmong Studies Consortium meeting held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in January 2017, two Hmong speakers on the same panel were each proposing a new

way, one putting it as “The Newest Idea for Making a Hmong Writing System That Can Be Used by All Dialects.”¹¹

Behind much of this creativity seems to lie a project aiming to instrumentalize writing and the internet. It could be argued that some diasporic Hmong appear now to speak on behalf of all, including the majority in Asia, and present the diaspora as the foundation of a new democratic Hmong culture: urban, modern, technologically savvy, and literate (Lee and Tapp 2010:90–96; Smalley, Vang, and Yang 1990).

The entry “Hmong people” on Wikipedia provides a prime example, leaning toward the diasporic minority's viewpoint. It spends over 30% of the space discussing the exile from Laos, while facts about the majority of Hmong who are not from Laos, and have not migrated, take secondary importance. The total number of Hmong worldwide is inflated, stated as 14 to 15 million with 9.4 million (Hmong, not Miao) in China.¹² Uninvited additions or alterations to the entry can be swiftly reversed by American Hmong, as happened to me, with the gatekeeper caring to identify himself.

The inescapable reality is that the diaspora accounts for 5% of the Hmong group's total population. The “rest of the Hmong,” as it were, live in Asia, where I have been working with several communities since my doctoral fieldwork. They chiefly operate as semi-subsistence farmers in mountainous terrain or as waged laborers, unaware of online debates regarding their language, culture, and collective self, concentrating instead on the contingencies of putting food on the table. Over the course of numerous discussions, I have found that many Hmong individuals in such contexts have little to say on the subject of their language and history. The vast majority of my respondents do not conceive of a common and universal Hmong culture, focusing instead on their particular community bounded by clan and lineage ties combined with geographic proximity. Outside messianic moments, the idea of standardizing their language appears alien to them. These individuals are likely to be representative of the bulk of Hmong society in Asia, but their voices are low-key, while I propose they ought to be actively brought into this conversation.

China in particular is home to most of the Hmong in the world. What happens there has major international consequences for the group. Twelve years ago, Enwall (2008:168) remarked that

the Hmong scripts used outside China have hitherto made little incursion into the Hmong groups living in China, although some Hmong scholars in China, as well as a few Hmong Christians in Yunnan, have learned the Romanized Popular Alphabet in order to get access to the relatively

11. The Fourth Hmong Studies Consortium International Conference program, 2017; <http://hmongstudies.in.cmu.ac.th/programs-of-conference/>.

12. This exaggeration is also found in the Dutch and Vietnamese Wikipedia entries while, strangely, the French, German, Italian, and Swedish ones are all much closer to the mark (consulted on October 3, 2019).

abundant publications (on paper and the Internet) by the Hmong in the United States.

Since Enwall wrote those lines, a growing number of Chinese Hmong have been state-schooled and have become computer literate. But to this end, it is the Chinese language that is mainly used by the *shaoshu minzu* and Han Chinese alike (Huang 2016; Poulin-Lamarre 2015; Tapp 2010*b*, pt. 4). An unknown but no doubt significant number of Chinese Hmong also use the Chinese official romanization in local schools, in DVDs, and in textual support for broadcasts by local radio stations (Xiong and Cohen 2005). Nonetheless, many now readily turn to the RPA to correspond with non-Chinese Hmong elsewhere. With the RPA taking off in the West thanks to its early adoption by Christianized Hmong in Laos, and with its continuous spread into China, Barney and Smalley's script may be becoming the most widely used script on the web and in social media (Tapp 2010*b*:218). However, and this point is too often neglected in public debates, the RPA still remains alien to the vast majority of Hmong speakers worldwide who have been directed to write their language in a state-designed script, who are not connected to the internet, or who are simply nonliterate. If the RPA is arguably the front-runner to become the elusive common script of the Hmong, it is still a long way from reaching hegemonic status and may never get there, should China elect to launch an offensive on this front.

Competing Life Projects

In sum, to this day there is no endogenous version of written Hmong used by the majority of speakers, nor has one from outside been decisively adopted, and the language remains short of common and authoritative lexicons, dictionaries, and grammars. Not that there is a lack of such works—on the contrary. But each has appeared in relation to the specific intention and position of its authors, mainly ignoring the rest. On the ground in Asia, dialectal and script variation is the norm from one country to the next, but also within national borders and at times even between provinces and valleys, thanks to the constant linguistic blend produced by clanic exogamy—what Mai Na Lee (2015:12) aptly described as “the lack of clan consensus, linguistic and cultural group disparities, and geographic divisions (the reality of a mountainous existence).” A century of amateur and professional language studies conducted since the first outsiders showed interest in this group has not answered the question regarding why Hmong lack a consensus on a common writing system; this is a puzzle kept in check by the incomplete mining of national archives, the group's geographical fragmentation, and local variations within the Hmong/Miao galaxy (Tapp et al. 2004). To this day, not only has unity been elusive, but divergent discourses and scripts keep appearing.

So how can we theorize this conundrum within an oral society that historically had at its disposal, and continues to have, the necessary tools and circumstances to “write itself,”

should it have wanted to? The notion that, through time, some societies might have adopted complex forms of political organizations and writing systems only to later return to a nonstate, nonliterate condition is not new. Scott (2009) himself mentions Greek and Roman antiquity and Chinese imperial history as having yielded such cases in the wake of wars and conquests. In Zomia, he deduces, there must have been cases of defeated societies who needed to flee, seeing wisdom in shifting their social organization to a more fluid and stealthy model. But Scott also thinks there are societies following such a path by attraction (pull factors) as much as by violence and decline (push factors): “The absence of writing and texts provides a freedom of maneuver in history, genealogy, and legibility that frustrates state routines” (2009:220). He adds, “Leaving behind the lowland centres meant stripping down the complexity of social structure in the interest of mobility. In this context, literacy and texts were of no further use and died out as a practice, though not as a memory” (226). This tactical retreat postulates a streamlining of social organization for practical reasons, rationing in true nomadic fashion the amount of baggage, material as much as cultural, one can carry in order to survive and hopefully thrive again. To succeed, such dispassion for one's “place” requires a lack of, or at least a dispensable form of primordial attachment to land and homeland.¹³ It turns out that such primordial detachment has been a frequent feature attributed as a core characteristic of the Hmong in twentieth-century ethnographies around Asia, starting with colonial and missionary reports (Diguet 1908; Savina 1924) all the way to the “Vietnam War” and its aftermath (Chan 1994; Geddes 1976).

States simply cannot refrain from pushing toward the increased legibility of margins and marginal peoples, facilitating social and political control (Scott 1998). Margaret Nieve (1988), among others, has made the point that in this process literacy can be weaponized—in her case to subjugate early historic Scotland—with writing playing a decisive role in installing state power over a people on the fringes (for a roundup, see Brandt 2018; Déleage 2018; Duffy 2000; Goody 1986). As Goody and Watt markedly offered in 1963, it is compelling to see the abandonment of writing and hierarchical social organization as a result of a tactical refusal of legibility and imposition of state power. Such repudiation would serve to underscore the agency of state actors. Edmund Leach (1954) famously suggested that the more egalitarian Kachin knew what they were doing in tangoing with the more hierarchized

13. That said, there is a generic Hmong myth of an original homeland millennia ago somewhere in northern China (Lee and Tapp 2010:2) but it has generated no particular longing except perhaps during sporadic messianic movements. It is after 1975 that this indifference started to morph for the first time into a narrative of nostalgia among the diasporic Hmong for the lost homeland of Laos (Schein 2004*b*; for more, see Tapp 2010*a*, 2010*b*, chap. 14).

Shan: the Kachin tactically adopted or walked away from the more complex ways of the Shan as they saw fit with regard to their own worldview and needs. Sally Engle Merry (2006:44–48) would say that the Kachin vernacularized elements of the Shan’s more complex social system by hybridizing them, as opposed to merely replicating them.

Scott describes a society refusing writing as one that is attracted to “the manifest advantages of flexibility and adaptation that an oral tradition has over a written tradition” (2009:26). One consequence of Hmong oral tradition (Thao 2006), when combined with the absence of formal leadership, is that under normal circumstances no one in particular speaks for the whole group, subgroup, or clan. Salient examples of this approach can be seen on the internet, with a large number of websites, blogs, and social media streams set up by Hmong individuals, chiefly in the diaspora and mainly from the United States, offering poised yet often contradictory pronouncements on core topics including Hmong history, culture, language—and scripts. Under such circumstances, what one believes to be “the truth” becomes pliable and highly contextualized.

Scott (2009:229) also writes: “To refuse or to abandon writing and literacy is one strategy among many for remaining out of reach of the state.” The notion of strategy summons the problem of intentionality, which I started addressing a few years ago (Michaud 2012) and which has been looming just under the surface throughout this article. Is the current collection of competing Hmong scripts merely the unintended consequence of broad sociohistorical processes, or could it belong to the realm of intention? If it is the former, one is thus merely faced with the random arithmetic of social life through space and time, and there is nothing more to it. If the latter, then evidence is needed. One way forward is to detect an underlying life project, that is, a locally rooted counterpoint to exogenous schemes by state and market in which the subjects’ agency, while not always explicit, still manifests itself (Blaser 2004:26; Ortner 2006). Indeed, writing about the Miao in China, Zhou (1983) documented how script reforms met dramatically different fates following local preferences, history, and cross-border ties. For his part, Holm (2013) showed that the Zhuang of Guangxi, instead of turning their back to literacy borrowed and then subverted a script to suit their particular needs while rendering it unintelligible to its original users.

But with the Hmong, the gap between the number of scripts produced and the absence of any taken up for collective use could not be wider. Is it a simple case of a good solution shunned by unreceptive beneficiaries (“until they know better”), or could it be a case of unwanted solutions declined by discerning recipients? Should the latter be closer to the truth, it still would not be enough to prove the existence of a deliberate project. When Marshall Sahlins (1999:xvi) discussed kinship-based societies, he wrote about the “resistance of culture” in trying to understand the social process of selective adoption of external influences—what he called “indigenizing modernity”: pragmatism drawn from common experience and the

lessons of history.¹⁴ In contrast, he observed that many scholars fall for the attractive idea of a “culture of resistance,” the romantic notion of a built-in will to resist, already criticized by Lila Abu-Lughod (1990). This romantic notion has led some, including Pushkin and Tolstoy when regarding the Caucasus highlanders, to label such societies “freedom-loving peoples,” a step back toward the dream of the “noble savage” not unrelated to some current excitement in the discipline around the idea of ontologies (Vigh and Sausdal 2014).

In this sense, it has been tempting for some nostalgic members of the Hmong diaspora and their supporters to dream of a glorious past (e.g., Quincy 2017, now in its third edition) and accept the idea that Hmong culture (singular) has become immune through time and space to domination, is spontaneously rebellious, and is fiercely independent, all desirable characteristics that, some have suggested, could be essential features of “Hmongness” (Chan 1994; Julian 2004:9; Lemoine 2002:6; Pao 2004). On the ground, however, reality tends to paint a more restrained picture. As a result of the intellectualization and possible amplified sense of self that come with exposure to education in the West (Tapp 2010*b*), some Hmong wish for all Hmong to join them in their particular quest and to accept a common life project regardless of where these individuals live or originate from. Writing, Nieke (1988) would say, has become a key weapon in their arsenal. Linguist Peter Unseth (2005:22) aptly notes that Hmong who emigrated from Southeast Asia want mostly to use a form of Roman script, seen as a powerful emblem flagging their “avant-gardism” and yielding increased power to be heard.

Yet, for the 95% of Hmong living in Asia who are rarely heard from in such debates, nothing remotely close to a common linguistic strategy seems to be emerging from their intricate transnational, transcultural, multilingual, and polysemic predicament. And I am less than sure that such a project would ever become a priority to a majority of them. More likely, for the 80% of Hmong dwelling within communist polities, the unyielding pressure of the heavily centralized state to attune to national standards is likely to be the main obstacle to a transnational solution. Cultural distinction in China, Vietnam, and Laos is a sensitive matter, handled by the state very carefully (Michaud 2009*b*). There, the penetration of RPA will be tolerated to a degree, but from the moment a danger to national unity is detected by the party, it will also be fiercely opposed, which adds another layer to this quandary.

In conclusion, is this discussion solving once and for all the question of the absence of a common Hmong script? I doubt it, not least because I am considering the problem from an outsider’s viewpoint, and because my suggestions, like Scott’s, bring together both facts and insights. But there is no such thing as a simple and unambiguous answer to this multifarious

14. Sahlins (1999:xvi) defines the resistance of culture as “the more inclusive form of historical differentiation, neither requiring an intentional politics of cultural opposition nor confined to the reactions of the colonially oppressed.”

question. I suggest that offering a challenging reading of this uncommon condition is a proposition to take a step back and think outside the box of the most convenient explanations some find attractive, fixated on fragmentation (“too many dialects,” “no common history”), tribalism (“lack of,” “pre-something”), and social evolutionism (“not yet,” “not quite”), or romanticism (“it’s in their blood”). This analysis does not prove beyond any doubt that a desire—or perhaps a strategy—to avoid becoming too legible explains why the global Hmong community have not clustered around a common script to this day. But now that the idea has been floated, I hope it will prove useful and will be debated, challenged, tweaked—and even refuted.

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Comments

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Regardless of whether scholars celebrate or criticize James C. Scott for his supposed brilliancy or pretension, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009) has undeniably engendered one of the liveliest debates in the social sciences in the last decade and an attention shift to an otherwise neglected region. Jean Michaud was one of the first scholars (Michaud 2010) to appreciate Scott’s theories as a stimulus for further investigations on the Asian uplands. In his current article, too, Michaud proposes a solely “political reading” inspired by Scott’s book, particularly chapter 6½ (Scott 2009:220–237).

Apart from the fact that Scott referred to the Hmongs as a prime example, the circumstance that script politics in general is still an understudied research field makes this article very interesting and relevant. Furthermore, Michaud makes no broad deductions but concludes with more questions and the hope to engender a lively discussion regarding the main question of his article: Is “the lack of consensus on a common writing system . . . a reflection of cultural agency” or “merely

the result of historical processes”? In other words, could there be any kind of intention behind the lack of a common script among the Hmongs?

As Michaud himself remarks, one problem we face in regard to intention is the evidence needed to prove the intention. Since it is impossible to provide evidence for oral societies and their supposed intentional abandonment or rejection of literacy in the past, we are left in the case of Scott’s proposition entirely with a chain of assumptions. In Michaud’s article no evidence is provided either, although doubts regarding an intention loom heavily between the lines. Fortunately, his question concerns the present and might find an answer if sufficient research is done among the Hmongs. Having a research focus on script politics in South Asia, I can at least offer my perspective and raise some points and questions that I consider relevant for further investigations.

Scott assumes a strict dichotomy between valley and hill populations with their specific characteristics, as, for instance, between literate and nonliterate societies. However, it is not only necessary to question unsubstantiated, and thus apodictic binary divisions, but also to differentiate strictly between literacy and script and their diverse functions. These functions depend, for instance, on the grade and spread of literacy. Scott paints a scenario of the past dominantly perceiving literacy as a tool used by the socioeconomic and religious elites of the valleys to administrate and control the population inhabiting the region of power. According to him, specific groups escaped from this control to the uplands and left literacy behind to stay more flexible for “cultural [and political] maneuver.” But culture and history are vigorously negotiated and altered in literate societies too, and with the invention of the printing press and the introduction of mass education, literacy today can also pose a serious threat to state power. State-induced censorship is the best evidence for this function.

Hence, various questions regarding literacy arise. Under what circumstances can literacy turn into a tool against the state? If the inhabitants of the so-called Zomia region were indeed aware of certain functions of literacy in the past, are these still relevant to them today? Is it still appropriate to call groups like the Hmongs an “oral society,” even though today more Hmongs might be literate than members of valley societies in the past? Does deliberate nonliteracy in a world in which (almost) nobody can escape state structures still make sense at all? And if literacy should once indeed have intentionally been left behind by the hill populations because of its unwanted functions, would not, first of all, an analysis of the functions of script, especially the differences between mono- and multiscriptality, help us to understand why a common script is lacking?

The phenomenon of bi- and multiscriptality—writing one language in two or more scripts—is well known from various regions (Bunčić, Lippert, Rabus 2016). Historically, in times of limited possibilities of mobility and communication, bi- or multiscriptality has been the norm, at least in South Asia, and not the exception. Widespread language monoscriptality in this

region is a relatively modern phenomenon. The implementation of specific scripts as well as the rise of monoscriptality go back to the spread and dominance of particular religions, the emergence of modern geopolitical entities, standardization processes with the introduction of the printing press, and so forth (Brandt and Sohoni 2018). It is highly interesting to now see an ongoing process among some ethnolinguistic groups basically reminding us of an older state.

My current research among Santals, a so-called tribe living scattered mainly in the plains of India and Bangladesh, has furnished some ideas on why individual Santals with diverging socioeconomic, educational, and gender background prefer one script over another, leading to a situation similar to that pertaining among the Hmongs. Santali is written in at least five different scripts: the Roman among Christian Santals, the script Ol Chiki invented by a Santal activist in the 1920s, and scripts otherwise used for the dominant *linguae francae* of the respective regions particular Santal groups inhabit—Bengali, Hindi, and Oriya. Although further substantiation is needed, there is strong evidence that dominantly members of the socioeconomic elite prefer Ol Chiki, while especially poor women prefer the script used for the *lingua franca*, and Christian Santals, regardless of their socioeconomic background, prefer the Roman script. The two main functions of script, which various interviewees also openly discussed with me, are seen as the strengthening and preservation of Santal identity and linguistic unification through Ol Chiki, contrasted with potential upward social mobility through the Roman or regional scripts. The latter function, clearly serving socioeconomic interests, obviously prevents a consensus on a common script for Santali.

Hence I would encourage an empirical study among Hmongs with different socioeconomic backgrounds in different regions instead of “a political reading” in search of “cultural agency” inspired by a theory based on a vague chain of assumptions. And above all, if socioeconomic factors were indeed one of the main reasons for escaping to the hills in the past, then we should consider these factors today too.

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How can the lack of a pan-Hmong script in the twentieth century be explained? Michaud suggests that this reflects the Hmong’s long-ago tactical rejection of literacy (Scott 2009) rather than arising merely from historical processes. To some extent, therefore, Michaud regards Scott’s (2009) political and historical readings as separate, if not contradictory. I argue that if being non- or postliterate and thus illegible was imperative for the Hmong over their long history of fleeing the state, developing literacy was also critical to enable them to engage the modern nation-state as minority subjects, forge connections

with others in diaspora, and/or activate ethno-nationalism. While rejecting or losing literacy can be a deliberate or tactical act, it may also be the unintended result of interactive processes.¹⁵ The question is how the politics of Hmong literacy unfolded under changing historical circumstances in the twentieth century and beyond—from non- or postliteracy to regional literacy to pan-Hmong literacy. I suggest that the political dynamics of Hmong literacy hinge on the myth of losing the Hmong script while fleeing the state. This myth serves as a symbolic two-way gate for multivalent actions targeting situational goals, such as rejecting literacy to flee the state, mobilizing literacy for religious and political empowerment while engaging the state, or handling diasporic situations. Many historical examples of the Hmong’s pursuit of literacy are built on the myth of losing the Hmong script and usually take the form of the “reappearance of the lost script.”

To understand Michaud’s political reading of Scott’s argument about the Hmong’s tactical rejection of literacy, the following three major historical phases must be clarified: (1) the age-old Hmong/Miao practice of fleeing the state; (2) the emergence of Hmong/Miao scripts throughout the twentieth century; and (3) efforts to unify pan-Hmong/Miao scripts at the turn of the twenty-first century. The Hmong people’s history of fleeing the state considerably affected the spread of the population and language diversity reflected in the sparse distribution of Hmong villages in southwestern China and the highlands of Southeast Asia compared with the more sedentary Miao villages in eastern Guizhou and western Hunan. On the move in the vast frontier region, the scattered Hmong population developed eight “subdialects” whose speakers were largely unintelligible to each other. Today, speakers of the Chuanqiandian subdialect in and outside China account for the majority of Hmong language speakers, but the other seven subdialects are spoken by about a third of the population.

The emergence of Hmong/Miao scripts throughout the twentieth century arose largely from colonialism, the nation-state system, ethno-nationalism, and Western missionary works. Some of these scripts achieved regional or even global literacy under special historical circumstances. The Pollard script was devised for the Ahmao, speakers of the Diandongbei subdialect, by a Methodist missionary at the beginning of the twentieth century. By the late 1950s, the Chinese state had created a romanized version of the Pollard script and a Hmong script based on the Chuanqiandian subdialect, together with scripts for the Miao dialects of western Hunan and eastern Guizhou. Outside China, the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), created by combining two Hmong scripts separately invented by

15. Alternative ways of reading the myth of losing Hmong literacy postulate a Hmong inferiority complex with reference to the power of literacy of the Chinese state (Tapp 1989b) and the Hmong’s choice of imaginative mimetic practice over Chinese literacy (Cheung 2017). Interestingly, these different ways of reading seem to be complementary rather than conflicting.

missionaries in Laos, was globalized by the post-Indochina War Hmong exodus, helping to ensure that Hmong communities scattered worldwide remained connected. Interestingly, unlike its historical counterpart, the Hmong's recent experience of fleeing the state has improved Hmong literacy. Most Hmong people in China and Vietnam only began to learn the RPA at around the beginning of the 1990s, thanks to increasing contact with overseas Hmong and the wide spread of Hmong media and visual and printed religious materials.

Yet creating a script is only one component of literacy; others include developing primers, teaching and learning, and reading and writing (Cahill 2014). A regional social structure is usually required to organize these components to develop literacy at the population level. The historical village (kinship)-based rather than regionally organized Hmong/Miao people explains the lack of literacy development until the construction of church networks by missionaries or the regional administration of modern nation-states. However, these regional organizations sometimes impeded the further unification of a pan-Hmong script, which required some degree of language compromise across group boundaries. For example, there was limited potential for compromise between orthographies invented by missionaries belonging to different sects of Christianity (Adams 2014), especially when the divide was compounded by dialectal differences. State language policies also deterred language compromise. The Chinese state decided to create four romanized scripts for literacy development in the different regional Hmong/Miao dialect groups in the 1950s rather than producing one unified Miao/Hmong script as advocated by native elites (GMYZW 1957:63–65). Furthermore, minority groups were distributed across national borders, and it was impossible to create a writing system for a whole group that met the competing requirements of the respective governments (Adams 2014). The RPA, which is used around the world, attracted many Hmong users in southern Yunnan at the turn of the century. However, its popularity in China has declined in recent years due to the diminished contact between Hmong within and outside China, particularly among the younger generation (Xiong 2019), who have grown up in the West and developed home-place ideas different from those of a generation ago.

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Michaud has always been a fair-minded and prolific commentator of Scott's book *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). In his current discussion about Hmong politics of writing, he pursues this engagement, drawing inspiration from Scott's chapter 6½—weak but nevertheless intriguing and stimulating piece about “postliteracy,” a deliberate rejection of writing

that fits in with Scott's broader contention that the hill people of the Southeast Asian Massif have strategically escaped state legibility.

Since Michaud's title is just as much a nod to Scott as it is to Foucault, let me point out that Foucault's proposal to define critique as “the art of not being governed *so much*” is a way of asking “how not to be governed *like that*”—which is significantly different from not being governed at all (see Foucault 1990 [1978], 1996; my emphasis). I interpret this as a hidden transcript of the article about the limitations of the Scottian model. In this spirit, having no claim to any expertise on Hmong studies, I simply discuss Michaud's art of not following the model *so much*.

The questions Michaud asks situate his essay in the genealogy of a search for the function of writing, whether it be a technology of state-making or a tool for making ethnonational claims and promoting Hmong unity. Here, Michaud further substantiates the argument he laid out in a short article published in *Anthropology Today* (2017). In concise terms, Michaud claims that Hmong as a “kinship-based” society does not cohere around a common political project that would be in keeping with transnational Hmong collectivity and that, accordingly, a common writing system is of little interest to the vast majority of its speakers in Asia. It follows that the enduring multiplicity of scripts persists because there is no shared political goal to motivate their standardization. Clearly, the argument would seem at first glance to rest on the logic of an embryonic, failed, or simply nonexistent nationalist project. But herein lies the twist: the “lack” of a standardized script is in fact a “will” to not be legible.

Indeed, there is no reason to assume that all Hmong are equally motivated by political action, that they all share similar goals or a will for a common destiny. Ultimately, the question is, Who are the “Hmong” we are talking about? Naming is a political endeavor (even the spelling of the name can be politically motivated). Michaud is straightforward about his positionality and cautious when unfolding his argument, well aware of the various parties for whom there are different and no doubt divergent stakes.

The Hmong case is therefore a refusal not of literacy but of standardization. Hmong scripts in their diversity continue to reaffirm existing identities and forms of belonging, and no one script has gained traction to foster the emergence of an “imagined community”—despite some attempts. This assertion echoes Scott's (2009:235–236) claim that in a lineage society, the “history-bearing unit” is strategically motivated to “leave [its] history open to improvisation.” It is not a refusal of history, but rather, of history *like that*. There is indeed ample ethnographic evidence, in Southwest China, for example, that oral traditions are resourceful in their ways of maintaining very long genealogies, making territorial claims, and defending rights. Yet if Scott (2009:226–228) devotes significant space to bracketing a range of uses and kinds of writings, it is because they do not support his main argument about writing as a technology of the state.

However, a script or writing system is not intrinsically an instrument of state power; it can also be a form of counterpower. As Michaud makes clear, this is exemplified by the case of Hmong messianic movements. Therefore, a political reading of the Hmong situation can hardly ignore the religious component, and I find particularly stimulating the proposal Michaud makes in passing that there could be a similar logic in the use of writing in messianic as well as ethno-nationalist movements. Kelly (2018) recently showed that invented scripts by several highlanders of the Massif are founded on religious practice but at the same time formulate a utopian dream of a national state, and in their often millenarist nature they in fact constitute an invention of a writing that is itself used “against the state.” It could be argued that an elective affinity can very well exist between writing and various social formations and political or religious projects. The issue lies perhaps in the too-stark opposition between writing and textuality.

Finally, Michaud rightly points out that a strategy of refusal (of literacy, or of a common script) raises the issue of intentionality. The diversity of Hmong scripts, rather than being the result of contingent historical processes (the article deftly details the long history of the creation of multiple exogenous and indigenous scripts), is sustained by what Michaud calls an “underlying life project” that manifests people’s agency. This “cultural agency” is rooted in the majority of the Hmong kinship-based organization.

There is an interesting tension here between the assertion of a subjectivist argument that identifies a conscious will (to refuse, e.g.), on the one hand, and what seems a subordination of agency to a cultural system (the dynamics of clan and lineages), on the other hand, effected by the reference to Sahlins’s (1999) notion of “resistance of culture.” This comes close to the long-standing question of whether agency—self-determination or autonomy—is located in the collective or in the individual. Michaud’s article importantly brings to our attention the fact that before we assume who or what has agency we should investigate more ethnographically rich notions (beyond resistance or freedom), which would help us qualify the processes through which subjects are transformed in the contemporary context. Given the tremendously diverse life trajectories of the various Hmong communities Michaud refers to, the issue of political space and its articulation with processes of cultural differentiation or homogenization is a particularly thorny one.

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This revised version of the paper has seen much toning-down of the derisory language that pervaded the previous draft. However, it still focuses on the use of James C. Scott’s Zomian theories to find explanation for the proliferation of “over two dozen scripts” in the Hmong language, and the “lack of

agreement on a common orthography in a relatively small society of 5 million speakers.”

To address this issue, the paper explores the Zomian proposition advanced by Scott (2009:229), namely, that for Asian highlanders, “to refuse or to abandon writing and literacy is one strategy among many for remaining out of reach of the state.” Thus, instead of seeing the many scripts as resulting from some creative Hmong persons simply wanting to experiment or fulfill their divine calling, the author considers “the lack of consensus on a common writing system” to be “a reflection of cultural agency rather than being merely the random outcome of historical processes.”

Whereas Scott (2009:235) links the absence of “written traditions” to state evasion, the writer uses the proliferation of writing scripts (the opposite of Scott’s proposal) for the Hmong situation. Although the information used for the paper is said to be based on yearly visits to Hmong communities in Thailand, Vietnam, and China for the last three decades, few actual facts are evident except in the first two sections of the article. The author, for instance, states that for the Hmong “no one in particular speaks for the whole group, subgroup, or clan.” Such claim regarding Hmong lack of representation and social organization does not reflect Hmong reality. Wherever the Hmong live, they are always represented by an elected leader at all the different levels. It also contradicts the author’s pronouncement that “some diasporic Hmong appear now to speak on behalf of all, including the majority in Asia.” One wonders why such observations are made when they are irrelevant to explaining the lack of a single Hmong writing script, the main topic under consideration.

This is probably because instead of staying with the “politics of writing Hmong language(s),” as stated in the title of the article, by concentrating on the history and development of each script to see why only two (the RPA and the *Pahawh*) are active today, the paper strays into Hmong “culture” and “diasporic politics,” with claims that the Hmong are only interested in writing during “very specific moments of rebellious crises.” Hmong “endogenous scripts” are seen as a “rebellious affair” when not all of them (e.g., the *Ntawv Paj Ntaub* developed by the Hmong Education Foundation in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in 1988) “appeared as part of passionate and brief outbreaks of Hmong messianic rebellions.” Pa Chay Vue was the only messianic leader engaged in armed rebellion, but he never had a writing script, contrary to the claim in the paper. The only Hmong messianic leader with a popular writing script is Shong Lue Yang, the Niam Ntawv or Mother of Writing (this latter name is used for the script inventor and not his script as incorrectly stated in the paper). However, Yang was never involved in any rebellion. The above sweeping statements seem to have been made without reference to anyone or any literature.

The conclusion to the article is unexpected and sudden. The author (Michaud 2017:10) earlier states that Zomia travels with the Hmong as part of their culture to their new life in the United States, but the present paper, which rehashes the 2017

“insights” now contends that “this analysis does not prove beyond any reasonable doubt that a desire or perhaps a strategy to avoid becoming too legible explains why the global Hmong community have not clustered around a common script to this day.” The “analysis” has not shown whether or not the multiscrypt Hmong people are “state-evaders” at what time in their history and in what locations. The author only links (imitating Scott) the lack of a single writing script to the likely desire to evade the state by the Hmong, despite the fact that throughout history, the Hmong have not committed “state evasion,” as they have worked closely with their lowland governments. This Hmong reality is readily available on the internet and in many books. Anachronistic and incongruent concepts from a time long gone (before WWII) are used, when Scott (2009:166, 325) himself has declared the death of Zomia.

To conclude, I find the article unsettling. It borders on an enchantment trip on James C. Scott. Some flashes of insight are given when Enwall (2008:155) is quoted as saying that “the success of a particular script depends both on its inherent effectiveness as a means of representing the language and on the subsequent propagation.” Had the author concentrated on this line of inquiry with actual fieldwork and historical facts, he would have done a better job that is grounded in reality. He should have kept discussion on the problems of propagating writing scripts, the fierce competition between the current scripts, and the wide adoption of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) system through “natural selection” (survival of the fittest) by the global Hmong public. Based on existing evidence, the issue of a single Hmong writing script cannot be explained through Scott’s fanciful Zomian rhetorics and “Hmong diasporic politics.” The Hmong are no Zomians.

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In studying many of the orthographies for the Hmong language(s) that have been documented over the past century, Jean Michaud asks why no stable consensus has emerged regarding a shared system of writing. His investigation provides rich insights into the nature of the Hmong transnational population and of other marginalized groups. Drawing on James Scott’s influential thesis (2009), Michaud suggests that despite many opportunities for a sole orthography to become the dominant system, a persistent lack of consensus is due to repeated acts of political agency by these people. The Hmong have tended to resist adopting a shared system of writing because that would promote the development of undesirable social hierarchies; their apparent preference for nonliteracy is motivated by their attempts to maintain a relatively egalitarian social organization.

Numbering at least 5 million people scattered across southern China and upland Southeast Asia, with several hundred

thousand in the diaspora (mostly in the United States), the Hmong are widely regarded and labeled as an ethnic minority in all of their countries of residence. Yet as Michaud points out, their culture and language differ substantially depending on subgroup, place of residence (down to local hamlet), religion, clan, and lineage, among other factors. Why, then, do we refer to them holistically as a transnational society, ethnicity, community, polity, or ethno-nationality? Why should there be consensus between Hmong living in different nation-states with contrasting political systems and economic circumstances? Could the lack of a common writing system merely be an indication of more substantial divisions?

Although he writes as an outsider, several decades of engagement and research with Hmong communities in Southeast Asia and China inform Michaud’s study. This sympathetic distance and almost omniscient understanding is built on an encyclopedic knowledge of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif (e.g., Michaud 2009a), coupled with fine-grained analysis of the subject, the culture(s), and the people in question. He urges us to go beyond four typical explanations regarding the diversity of Hmong language orthographies: fragmentation of the community and culture, tribalism (and perhaps regionalism and nationalism), social evolutionism (i.e., an inevitable outcome of historical processes), and romanticism (e.g., the romance of resistance). This lack of consensus is certainly motivated by politics to an extent, which is at the crux of Michaud’s argument, but fragmentation cannot be dismissed entirely. In fact, a political reading has to take account of the dispersed populations and forcefully separated communities to explain their politics. While most book-length studies of Hmong culture and social life have been written within one national context (e.g., Ó Briain 2018), even those that take a transnational approach such as Michaud’s own work on the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands highlight differences on either side of a geopolitical boundary (e.g., Turner, Bonnin, and Michaud 2015).

Michaud’s reading through Scott is overenthusiastic only when he regurgitates the debate on Hmong and other people’s social organization potentially being “postliterate.” While folklore is an important receptacle for historical knowledge, much of that knowledge is communicated through allegory. Tales of a lost system of writing, books that were eaten or destroyed when fleeing state powers, or a formerly written history that was converted into oral memory enable the Hmong to maintain egalitarian relations between themselves and in interactions with other social groups (“We could do that if we wanted to, but we choose not to”). Scott allows for the radical possibility that these people may have had a writing system in the past to suggest that members of a literate society can choose to leave that society and embrace nonliterate ways of living. His reference to this possibility is a hypothesis that demands evidencing. Further indulgence here undermines Michaud’s central argument and veers into one of the less palatable of the four typical explanations: romanticization.

The initial question posed by Michaud opens up many fruitful lines of inquiry that deserve further attention. He

explores the motivations driving linguists associated with Christian missionization, nation-building projects, and diasporic agency. The most puzzling topic he raises is the turbulent history of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), the most internationally visible orthography for Hmong. RPA is widely used by Hmong Americans, in Christian publications, and in most online debates. Yet this writing system remains marginal for the mainstream of the Hmong or “the rest of the Hmong” (excluding those living in the so-called West), as Michaud terms them. Many Hmong in Laos and Thailand engage with RPA through their dialogue with Hmong in the diaspora. But the majority of the Hmong—83% according to Michaud’s estimate—reside in China and Vietnam. This segment of the population has less frequent interactions with the diaspora, Christian missionization in these regions is more tightly policed and restricted, and many state schools in both countries still doggedly promote the waning nationalized orthographies. Even those who regularly use RPA cannot agree on an overarching dictionary or spelling system. So, despite the potential of mass-mediated communications technology to propagate a dominant orthography, Michaud’s political reading suggests that this fragmented population may never be unified by one system of writing.

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Challenging theses are needed in anthropology, and Jean Michaud’s contribution on Hmong scripts falls into this category. Based on a long-term involvement with the Hmong in several countries and on an intimate knowledge of the relevant sources, Michaud addresses James Scott’s (2009) central hypothesis that highland populations have adopted “tactical disorders” to escape the state’s grip. Beyond the obvious fact that the variety of scripts for the Hmong language can be explained by historical contingencies, Michaud argues that the absence of a common writing system could reflect their political inclination to state evasion. He leaves the question open, as a starter for a debate, despite his clear sympathy with Scott’s hypothesis.

By comparison with Scott’s argument, built on short case studies often broached expediently, Michaud’s paper is based on a specific issue. This is the best way to move forward in large debates with a shallow empirical basis. Another difference is that Scott does not address the situation after 1950, for largely defensive reasons in my view. Michaud ignores this limit and questions the present, marked by diaspora dynamics, the internet, or the enforcement of national borders. This article is thus an important step to confront Scott with current situations, and my three comments below point in that direction.

First, the Hmong script diversity is huge in absolute terms, but not in relative terms when one narrows the lens to specific settings. The “over two dozen scripts” Michaud mentions form a cumulative list starting in 1908. However, based on what he explains, it seems that only a half-dozen scripts are still regularly used today, which is not so much for a population scattered in patches on a 1,500-km-long belt straddling mountain ranges in five different Asian countries (not even including the diaspora), and characterized by a linguistic diversity only briefly evoked in the paper. I do not mean that scaling down the diversity provides a definite answer to Michaud’s initial question, but it allows us to recast it at an appropriate level. In a specific context, most Hmong communities are confronted with only one or two scripts, and they probably know nothing about the others. With this in mind, and knowing the vagaries of the Hmong history across borders and through wars, script diversity seems less perplexing than at first sight.

Second, Michaud is supportive (with a reserved attitude) to Scott’s central ideas on “Zomian” intentionality: people adopt technologies and institutions to escape the grip of the state. The coexistence of various scripts for the Hmong language(s) could ultimately be related to their hostility toward centralization. However, this is to leave in the background the very fact that segments of the Hmong population strive for proposing a common script, be they prophets, ethno-nationalists, or grammarians (or all together). The only intentionality that surfaces in Michaud’s empirical data is not *against* writing, nor *against* unifying scripts: it is about creating (or retrieving) a writing system and standardizing scripts. This is attested to by the myth of a lost script, by the continuous local invention of new writing systems for a century, and by the leaders’ vibrant call to join together around one single script. If the Hmong are an iconic example of Zomian highlanders, their unceasing willingness to create and unify writing is a serious challenge to Scott’s model of Zomian attitude.

My third comment concerns the relevance of the Hmong scripts—by contrast to the national scripts—to test Scott’s “chapter 6½.” Scott’s initial hypothesis has to do with the rejection of literacy to allow “shape-shifting, pliable forms of custom, history, and law” (2009:230), to protect themselves from power centralization or full inclusion into the lowland states. The majority of the Hmong Michaud refers to, even those living in the faraway countryside, are presently literate, possibly not in Hmong language, but certainly in the relevant national languages: Chinese, Vietnamese, Lao, Thai—and English for the bulk of the diaspora. In Laos, literacy among the Hmong over 15 years reaches 70.2% (female: 58.4%; male: 81.8%; Lao Statistics Bureau 2015:158). The figures should be higher for the youth, and for the Hmong in neighboring countries literacy is higher and more evenly distributed across national space. Based on my experience in Laos, Hmong greatly value oral and written competence in the national language (Lao), which is a necessity in the present context, including to defend their rights (Petit 2017:95–96). Any suggestion on “rejecting” such competency would be simply baffling for them. Of

course, Hmong also have a strong attachment to their language and always use it between themselves. But this is the language of intimacy and community, not the language that connects them to the state. Taking the state's perspective, the important point is that the national language is acknowledged as such and learned by all children in the country. This turns the Hmong into potential "clerks" of the state, following Gellner's (1983) felicitous expression. And indeed, the states of the region have devoted much effort during the last decades to reach that twin goal, with large success. In sum, rather than an intentional tactic to avoid the state's grip, the diversity of the Hmong scripts could be analyzed as backing the monopoly of the national language on all matters related to education and public rule, turning the Hmong into national citizens and political subjects.

In short, I argue that moving forward to answer the grand question raised by Michaud requires us to investigate script diversity in situated contexts; to decipher intentionality through concrete agency; and to analyze literacy not only in multi-scripted but also multilingual contexts, where national languages tend toward hegemony. This assertion is close to the commitments of the New Literacy Studies initiated by Brian Street and others, who call for approaching literacy as situated in social contexts. These reflections have been stimulated thanks to Michaud's text, whose aim was to "energize a debate," and I hope they will help to reincorporate the Zomian issue into the twenty-first century as intended by the author.

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Inspired by James Scott's political conceptualization of Zomia, Michaud's "The Art of Not Being Scripted So Much" offers a compelling thesis that the Hmong setting aside of written language was the result of political deliberations rather than due to a "natural" linguistic evolutionary processes. Michaud's assessment of the politics of Hmong ethnolinguistic representations, along with those of his peers (Enwall, Tapp, Lee, Leepreecha) is a captivating read. Of particular interest is his recognition that North American Hmong, a mere 5% of the total Hmong population worldwide, speaks on behalf of all Hmong constituencies. In Hmong studies, the orality and the orthography of Hmong language and the terms used to describe related groups of people bear two notable strands of political intention. One pertains to the Hmong diaspora in the United States and another to Hmong and relative groups in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam, and particularly the Miao (60% of all Hmong) in China. "Hmong" and "Miao" are alleged to be two different ethnonyms for the same people. Both are "cumbersome umbrellas" in the sense that while "Miao," the term used as a state-designated ethnonym in China that covers the Qho Xiong, the Hmub, and the A Hmao (Schein 2004a:274),

"Hmong" is intended to encompass the Hmong, the Mong, and the Miao (Thao and Yang 2004:3–4). The rub is that some of the subgroups are linguistically related to one another while others are not. Michaud highlights the comparison between the Hmong in North America who are more concerned about a common script representing Hmong language than the rest of the 95% of their claimed compatriots living in the Southeast Asian Massif. Their common diasporic experiences as well as their ongoing Christian conversion and recent geopolitical entanglements afford them a global venue to speak in a unifying manner.

It is commonly assumed that the people now referred to as Hmong and Miao once lived in the plains of current China. Their origin myths, found either in their native accounts or in Han Chinese mythological literature, permit scholarly speculations that the geographical region of their ancestors was in an agriculturally fertile area south of the Yellow River. In these varied accounts this group was understood to be either non-Han people or a subgroup of the Han (Tapp 2001:116). The political significance of these accounts emphasizes their "armed encounters" (Lee 2007:18) with the Han Chinese dynasties and their subsequent involuntary southward migration into what Scott calls "Zomia," a zone inhabited by political refugees with "bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity" (Scott 2009:7). In the process of escaping from successive Chinese dynasties, it is alleged that the written form of their language was lost. This is where Michaud's thesis is intertextually aligned with Scott's understanding of orality as a strategic decision achieved for the purpose of "state evasion" (Scott 2009:178, 199). In principle this strategic orality has allowed Hmong and Miao people to maintain a shapeshifting mode of being over centuries, a mode that Scott metaphorizes as "elusive 'jellyfish' economic and social forms" (2009:220).

Orthographies of Hmong oral language came onto the scene in the early twentieth century via the European Christian conversion project. As Michaud notes with his careful reading of the missionary history, an orthographical process often takes place when an oral-linguistic constituency enters deep entanglements with larger, external forces of change. In Michaud's findings, several endogenous Hmong scripts were developed in the course of Hmong messianic movements, beginning in ancient times and present up to the arrival of modern missionaries. This historical reading is largely consonant with Tapp's assessment that the endogenous scripts were intimately associated with modern Hmong people's "desire for literacy" (Tapp 1989a:70) in their mass conversion to Christianity. It should be noted here that this particular modern biblical literacy began with dominant non-Hmong languages, for example, Chinese and Burmese, and then shifted to the Hmong orthographies that Michaud names, such as the Pollard script. This means that before the Hmong orthographies, the Hmong converts were reading the Bible in the languages of their dominant neighbors (Tatsuki 2013:89; Wang 2008:207).

Another historical vignette that could be added to Michaud's critical work is that in the case of Samuel Pollard's

mission, many Hmong people's initial intent for their Christian conversion was aimed at literacy rather than the religion itself (Wang 2008:2007). This could be counted as the endogenous linguistic agency of the Hmong with the orthographed orality containing authentically Hmong linguistic contents with a Christian orientation. In this regard, the Hmong "art of being scripted" as well as their decision to be script free is a result of the enactment of both endogenous and exogenous factors. In particular they afford the globally connected Christian constituency of the Hmong to see themselves as "enlightened Hmong" (Lee 2007:1) with more venues for outreach and political self-representation. This also answers the question of why the remaining 95% of Hmong scattered in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand are not as enthusiastic as their diasporic counterparts about creating a unifying script: they have not converted to Christianity; they are not in diaspora; many of them choose their animist, or modern, or animist-modern modes of being in their respective countries; and they continue to retain the orality of their language for tactical maneuvering in the political interstices of modern nation-states.

The boundary of a linguistic identity could be likened to a geographical borderland in the sense that it is never a clear-cut cartographical line on a map but rather a topographically varied and politically gradational zone of contacts. In it, one language meets and hybridizes with its "outside" counterparts, and selectively sharpens particular aspects of remembered pasts for the sake of proclaiming ethnic distinction or of emphasizing familial relations with its neighbors for the expediency of trade and other international affairs. Michaud's work on the orality and orthography of Hmong language is a critical contribution to the diverse debates of disputed Hmong mythological origins and ethnolinguistic politics in Asia and elsewhere in the world.

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A well-phrased problem or question is often more valuable than an elaborately proved thesis. Michaud's main question, the reasons for the persistent absence of a consensus on a script for the Hmong language, is well founded and warrants explanation. The offered political reading of it, inspired by James C. Scott, is stimulating and calls attention to the interdependence of writing systems and politics, political aspirations, activism, ethno-nationalism, and so forth.

Inasmuch as this paper is conceived and constructed in reference to Scott, we cannot escape first to touch upon his argumentation before dealing with that of Michaud. Since the publication of *The Art of Not Being Governed* 10 years ago, serious doubts have been raised concerning Scott's influential

thesis. Though his rehash of "secondary primitivism" or "cultural regression" that goes back as far as the German culture-historical school of the 1920s is in many cases probable even if not demonstrable, his main argument about "intentionality" is much less convincing. Obviously, any adaptation seems to be "intentional" post-factum insofar as it has been proved to be beneficial or advantageous for the group in question. But whether this really means calculation, foresight, and mindfulness—that is, it is intended or done by design—is another question. Does the fact that a society is egalitarian and practices swidden agriculture prove that this is due to an intentional strategic option against wet-rice agriculture and stratified society? Does the fact that a society lacks literacy but has myths about a stolen or lost script prove that once they had writing systems but willingly dismissed them, realizing the advantages of "not being scripted so much"? I think Scott's claim of tactical rejection of literacy among upland groups of Asia is at best an interesting hypothesis that is lacking in proofs. His Greek and Roman examples are misleading: they occurred in the wake of wars and conquests, and the sources do not help to clarify intentions or strategic options that led to switches back and forth between orality and literacy in given situations. The Chinese "case" is not even a historical fact; it is a musing about "what would have happened if." And even if Greek, Roman, or Chinese history has truly produced such cases, does it prove that this happened in the Southeast Asian Massif, too? To cut a long story short, for me the weakest proposition of Scott is in his chapter 6½, "Orality, Writing, and Texts" and, especially, the proposed intentionality in it. To take it as a point of departure and/or a reference point is therefore like constructing a house on a moorland.

Michaud is naturally well aware of the problem: "The notion of strategy summons the problem of intentionality . . . which has been looming just under the surface throughout this article. Is the current collection of competing Hmong scripts merely the unintended consequence of broad sociohistorical processes, or could it belong to the realm of intention? . . . If the latter, then evidence is needed." My only reservation concerning the paper is precisely this: the lack of any evidence confirming intentionality. Notwithstanding the telling references to Leach and Goody, Nieke and Duffy, there is nothing that confirms de facto intentionality in the Hmong case. Not being acquainted personally with them, I am not in the position to pronounce myself with certainty. My feeling is, however, that from the materials at hand so concisely presented by Michaud, one will hardly ever find such evidences. To find them, one should perhaps delve more into the sociopolitical context of Hmong writing systems and of their authors and aims, the use of the written documents, their articulation to political, evangelical, economical, etc. goals; in short, an anthropological study of them is needed. Also, my impression is that intentionality is discussed most of the time on a too general level: perhaps it would be rewarding to go deeper down to the personal level that could reveal something about the strategic aims and intentions of the actors.

But all these problems are negligible as compared to the assets of the paper. The ingenuity and fruitfulness of Michaud's reasoning lie, it seems to me, in the fact that he formulates his proposal as a question or working hypothesis and not as an assertion. Visibly, his main aim is not to "prove" pro or contra anything. He does not want to present "evidences" even if he floats their eventuality. Rather, he wants to fruitfully launch the idea that "a lack of consensus regarding a common writing system might be a reflection of cultural agency rather than being merely the random outcome of historical processes." And this is his great merit: taking a perhaps erroneous idea as a starting point in order to direct the attention to a hitherto unexplored topic, to provoke discussion and promote research. Even if personally I am not convinced by the pertinence of his proposition, I cannot but fully agree with his hope: "now that the idea has been floated, . . . it will prove useful and be debated, challenged, tweaked—and even refuted."

Reply

I seem to find myself in the unexpected position of having the vast majority of my commentators receiving this article constructively, voicing in particular broad support of its objective: to stimulate a fresh scholarly debate on the politics of writing Hmong (and other) language(s). All do not necessarily concur with every aspect of my proposition, far from it, but I warmly welcome this genuine reception. Thus, I will mainly underline the elements in each comment that appear particularly salient to me here, and will try to see if an agenda for prospective research can be hammered out. But first, a few words on the intellectual background of the article and, by extension, on this whole conversation.

About Scott's Input

Several commentators voice reservations about Scott's theses of Zomia as a state-evading space and the abandonment of writing as a stealth strategy, and that certainly reflects the impression Scott's book has made on many social anthropologists, those working on the high regions of Asia but also beyond. In his commentary, Pierre Petit sums up the cause for such hesitations: "[Scott's thesis is] built on short case studies often broached expediently." Or more delicately put, Victor Lieberman (2010:336) represented a number of historians skeptical about *The Art of Not Being Governed* when stating that Scott's evidential base may not be strong enough to safely support its theoretical superstructure.

Whatever one's relationship to Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, it has provided a terrific boost for social science scholarship of highland Asia. It has been talked about in hundreds of scholarly publications and dozens of conference panels over the last decade. Without his challenge, all of these plus

this article and the ensuing debate would not have seen the light of day; we are all surfing Scott's wave here. On a personal note, I confess that my academic life has changed since the publication of *The Art of Not Being Governed*. Prior to it, my work on the Southeast Asian Massif felt like that of a lone believer in such a shared space, toiling on an invisible subject ignored by most, focusing on a nonplace that has been conveniently reduced to the rank of shattered margins on the fringes of great Asian nations; there is a colossal anthropological literature reciting this trope. With Scott and the seed planted by Willem van Schendel (2002), this obscure nonplace acquired visibility overnight. As Lieberman (2010:336) thoughtfully appraised, "Scott's central achievement, then, is to bring hill peoples into the mainstream of regional history." Sanford F. Schram (2012:530) added, "*The Art of Not Being Governed* has methodological significance not because of its technical sophistication, but because it powerfully reminds us that the idea behind a work of scholarship is more important than its method, especially if the scholarship is intended to be politically and socially pertinent." To the arguable exception of Edmund Leach (1954), no anthropologist of this high region had ever succeeded in doing that, and I maintain that this is an achievement worth emphasizing.

However, the fact that I share my colleagues' calls for prudence should not be doubted. I have made this clear in a number of publications I have devoted to Scott's work—and he gently chides me over it. Yet, I firmly believe that Scott's thesis is not only valuable, it is also indispensable food for thought from the field of political science offered to social anthropology and other disciplines, though not food to be swallowed without diligent inspection. My aim here has been encapsulated fully by Gábor Vargyas when he writes that a well-phrased question is often more valuable than an elaborate thesis, "taking a perhaps erroneous idea as a starting point in order to direct the attention to a hitherto unexplored topic, to provoke discussion and promote research." Hence I argue that there is a need to engage with partial data and explanations in order to decipher and interpret them together, which is precisely what critical social sciences are meant to do. This is possibly where one commentator, Gary Yia Lee has missed my point: I am not interested in promoting categorical thoughts and putting people into boxes. More profitably, I am engaging in pointing to doors and windows that could be opened to stimulate collective thinking and shed unexpected light on zones of a problem misinterpreted at times or left in the dark. The exact nature of that collective thinking and the conclusions it may come to are beyond the scope of my work as an individual. I believe this was James Scott's intention too.

On the Comments

Carmen Brandt stresses the importance to differentiate between literacy and script; this is a fundamental point. My suggestion here is not that Hmong are nonliterate, but quite the opposite; they are multiliterate, the exact balance between

scripts and languages depending on where politics and history have led them. My contention is that there seems to be no agreement on which script should best represent “the Hmong,” leading therefore to the persistence of multiscriptality (I thank Brandt for this most apposite term). Brandt and Sohoni (2018) pointedly remarked that monoscriptality has generally been a by-product of state appearance, central control, the press, and state religions, a well-known process leading commentator Stéphane Gros to think that the Hmong case is not so much a refusal of literacy as it is a rejection of cultural and political standardization. For Lonán Ó Briain, the Hmong’s tactical refusal of a common script could be summarized in a bold statement: “We could do that if we wanted to, but we choose not to.”

Using the case of the Santal in Bengal, Brandt notes that different scripts may appeal to different strata of Santal society according to socioeconomic status (for upward mobility), religion (congregation and proselytizing, as also emphasized by Smyer-Yü), and levels of education (to fit the state’s project more or less closely). Gros, working on the Drung *shaoshu minzu* of the remote upper Nu valley in western Yunnan, adds that elective affinity can very well exist between writing and various social formations and political or religious projects. In fact, most commentators share this point.

Brandt also asks, Is it still appropriate to call groups like the Hmong an “oral society”? The threshold from which a society ceases operating along the principles of orality is a very difficult one to locate, if even possible. Orality often ties in with less formal social organizations and power structures. The majority of Hmong, despite Lee’s suggestion, are still upland farmers living along social organization principles determined by blood ties, refractory to state-imposed political representation and structural inequality. In the rural areas of Asia, when village representatives are elected, as indeed they must now be by national administration diktats, it is above all to answer the state’s call for legibility; on the ground, most elected leaders simply play a buffer role between state administration and local lineage elders, which is also true of kinship-based groups such as the Yao, Konyak, Lisu, Akha, Katu, and so on. Co-occurrence may happen, but in rural settings where most Hmong still live, and especially outside nations formerly colonized by European powers, it is not the rule.

A specialist of the Hmong/Miao in China, Siu-woo Cheung warns that seeing literacy merely as a chosen tool for the state to harness and dominate societies, as Scott’s proposition seems to advocate, implies that one is ignoring that literacy can also be a tool for liberation—a tool for forging connections, empowering, supporting political resistance and opposition to domination, a vision shared by several commentators and myself. Cheung suggests that the political dynamics of Hmong literacy hinge on the myth of losing the Hmong script while fleeing the state, with the “reappearance of the lost script” possibly being an effort to unify pan-Hmong/Miao at the turn of the twenty-first century. Cheung justly argues the absence in Hmong society in China today of the political power or ca-

capacity of developing specific literacy vehicles. It is hard not to see the old truth in his statement that “The historical village (kinship)-based rather than regionally organized Hmong/Miao people explains the lack of literacy development until the construction of church networks by missionaries or the regional administration of modern nation-states. However, these regional organizations sometimes impeded the further unification of a pan-Hmong script, which required some degree of language compromise across group boundaries.”

Stéphane Gros sees Scott’s chapter 6½ as a weak yet intriguing and stimulating piece about “postliteracy,” as a deliberate rejection of writing. He comments, “I interpret this as a hidden transcript of the article about the limitations of the Scottian model,” which he nicely calls my “art of not following the [Scottian] model *so much*.” Gros, aware as much as I am of the various Hmong communities for whom there are different and no doubt divergent stakes, then asks who are “the Hmong” we are talking about. He is thus underscoring the multiplicity of voices inherent to a transnational kinship-based social body that has shunned centralizing power and does not seem to believe in the worth of letting a few speak for all.

Gary Yia Lee’s initial sentence needs deciphering, as readers do not have access to the information he refers to. Lee states, “This revised version of the paper has seen much toning-down of the derisory language that pervaded the previous draft.” This statement baffles me. At no point in this process did I write or mean derision. As for the “revision,” the published version has seen the usual updating and light editing. The “previous draft” he mentions is thus merely the paper submitted to CA for publication, the version the three blind assessors and the previous CA editor Mark Aldenderfer accepted.¹⁶ It is also the version the seven other commentators have worked from to write their comments. Only Lee took offense.

The way I read Gary Yia Lee’s concerned, and sometimes vexed, comments, the ultimate question he raises seems to be, Who should be allowed to speak about the Hmong, and what is needed to confer legitimacy to their view? I certainly believe Lee is a legitimate commentator and that is why I insisted on him being invited to join this conversation. Lee is a Hmong scholar and part of the Western-educated Laotian diaspora, a move set in motion by the communist victories of 1975. He disagrees with this article and in the process questions my legitimacy, my intentions, and it seems, my word too. This contrasts with the other commentators, all non-Hmong scholars who nevertheless felt able and justified to share ideas constructively. Their contributions present an implicit challenge to an essentialist take that only Hmong or Hmong-vetted actors may competently speak about the Hmong. This not to be confused with the right to speak *on behalf of* the Hmong,

16. Aldenderfer wrote at that time, “The reviewers are unanimous that your manuscript is almost ready for publication. I rarely see such praise in the first round of reviews even if the reviewers support an acceptance.”

which only Lee appears to claim here. He advocates “the wide adoption of the ‘Romanized Popular Alphabet’ (RPA) system through ‘natural selection’ (survival of the fittest),” an assertion with troubling implications. As commentator Dan Smyer-Yü points out, “the Hmong ‘art of being scripted’ [. . . affords] the globally connected Christian constituency of the Hmong to see themselves as ‘enlightened Hmong’ (Lee 2007:1).”

Anthropology has long established that beyond shared ethnicity, equally important factors also play a central part in research: gender, age, family background, social status, class, type and level of education, religion, ideological agendas, and more. Apparent sameness has its complications. Any research implies power relations that include the researcher’s position as an “insider” or an “outsider,” or what is sometimes an occupation of both roles (Valentine 2002). A power discrepancy exists between the researcher and the research community, participants as much as gatekeepers, and the researcher’s privilege compared to the study community, especially in Global South contexts (Dowling 2016; Griffiths 2017; Rose 1997). Consequently, what is central here is not so much whether there will be impacts due to one’s positionality, because there will be, but to be sufficiently reflexive about these to avoid misreadings caused by what Gibson-Graham (1994:219) termed “shifting subjectivities.” I am of the opinion that a variety of viewpoints from informed and carefully reflexive participants contributes to enriching a debate, while the silencing of unwelcome voices invariably leads to an impoverished discussion.

Lonán Ó Briain, who works on the ethnomusicology of Hmong communities in northern Vietnam, also stresses the point made by Gros. Ó Briain writes, “This lack of consensus [on a common script] is certainly motivated by politics to an extent, which is at the crux of Michaud’s argument, but fragmentation cannot be dismissed entirely.” To further his point, Ó Briain asks, “Why, then, do we refer to them holistically as a transnational society, ethnicity, community, polity, or ethno-nationality? Why should there be consensus between Hmong living in different nation-states with contrasting political systems and economic circumstances? Could the lack of a common writing system merely be an indication of more substantial divisions?” The direct consequence of such a statement is that “a political reading [of the Hmong situation] has to take account of the dispersed populations and forcefully separated communities to explain their politics.” To do so fruitfully, Ó Briain suggests that new locally rooted surveys with sound ethnography are necessary. I address this in the last section.

Speaking from the perspective of his work on Tai-speaking minorities in the rural uplands of Laos, Pierre Petit, contrasting with Scott’s “bird’s-eye view,” as it were, welcomes that my analysis is based on a specific question, contributing to testing Scott’s macroscopic view against the realities of one particular society. This, for Petit, is the best way to move forward when faced with “large debates with a shallow empirical basis.” Petit remarks that despite the number of scripts in circulation for writing Hmong language, most Hmong communities are actively exposed to only one or two of these without much

awareness of others—which is also my experience in Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan. While he observes that the national language is acknowledged and learned by all Hmong children in Laos, Petit recognizes that “Hmong also have a strong attachment to their language and always use it between themselves.” To him, this is the language of intimacy and community, as opposed to the language that connects the community to the outside and the state. From this he concludes that with the accidental Hmong history across borders and through wars, the diversity of scripts should be less perplexing than what it seems to suggest.

From his vantage point in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan at the geographical heart of Zomia, Dan Smyer-Yü, an anthropologist of religion in the trans-Himalayas, draws on Nick Tapp (1989a:70) to observe that Hmong endogenous scripts were intimately associated with modern Hmong people’s “desire for literacy in their mass conversion to Christianity.” As elsewhere in China and as similar with a number of other non-Han ethnicities, Smyer-Yü thus highlights Christian conversion as a factor standing at the center of the politics of writing minority languages. This, for him, explains why non-Christian Hmong “continue to retain the orality of their language for tactical maneuvering in the political interstices of modern nation-states.”

Gábor Vargyas, studying kinship-based Bru clusters in Vietnam since the early 1980s, joins others to emphasize “the interdependence of writing systems and politics, political aspirations, activism, ethno-nationalism, and so forth.” However, to him, an assumption of intentionality on the part of the Hmong is perhaps the most contentious element in this discussion: “Obviously, any adaptation seems to be ‘intentional’ post-factum insofar as it has been proved to be beneficial or advantageous for the group in question. But whether this really means calculation, foresight, and mindfulness—that is, it is intended or done by design—is another question.” Several, including myself, also raise this flag, arguing that even if literacy regression may have occurred in other locales at other times—a proclamation by Scott that some commentators question—it does not mean that it was done intentionally. I have written elsewhere (Michaud 2012:1869), from research conducted among the Hmong Leng of northern Vietnam, that “on the basis of the observable signs, the facts suggest that Hmong in Lào Cai province do have one or several life projects in the sense of Ortner [2006] and Blaser [2004], visible in the degree of consistency across space and time in the ways they deal with the snares of adversity, the requests of modernization and the hardships inherent to being dominated. There is however little visible proof of this coping mechanism being designed.”

To Further This Conversation

I see several avenues benefiting from a degree of consensus among the group of authors contributing to this exchange—new ethnography, for instance. Without neglecting its instructive

potential, there is a need to move beyond the theorizing angle and foster empirical, corroborative research among all the region's "minority" groups. In Pierre Petit's words, the need is "to investigate script diversity in situated contexts; to decipher intentionality through concrete agency; and to analyze literacy not only in multiscritped but also multilingual contexts, where national languages tend toward hegemony, . . . approaching literacy as situated in social contexts." In Gábor Vargyas's words, we need to "delve more into the sociopolitical context of Hmong writing systems and of their authors and aims, the use of the written documents, their articulation to political, evangelical, economical, etc. goals; in short, an anthropological study of them is needed . . . [including] the strategic aims and intentions of the actors." Lonán Ó Briain and Carmen Brandt recommend empirical studies of the largest possible number of local Hmong groups, Brandt also suggesting to detach literacy (prevalent in most communities now) from scriptality. Stéphane Gros believes that "we should investigate more ethnographically rich notions (beyond resistance or freedom), which would help us qualify the processes through which subjects are transformed in the contemporary context." Intentionality, the thorniest point perhaps, needs to be evidenced if we are to keep discussing it in this cultural context.

It also seems vital to document the diversity of Hmong agency in responding to modernity, state (and regimes), and market influences, in order to detect underlying life projects. With Hmong, as with members of many minority societies in Asia and beyond, the educated elite, the rural farmers, the Christian converts, the animists, the monarchists, or the communists all have diverse and often differing interests. Yet, daily, they all exercise their agency and make choices that are unavoidably determined by identity, yes, but also by local circumstances, history, economic opportunities and pressures, and the power relations they find themselves embedded in across political regimes with drastically distinct visions of the collective good.

And it is imperative to seek active involvement in this debate from all segments of Hmong society around the world, rural as much as urban, formally "uneducated" as well as educated, men and women, young and old, without whom conclusions will remain tentative and proposals to move forward, tilted. This task may be the most difficult as critical reflexivity is not necessarily an easy ask of farmers tilling the land, while a range of political and ideological agendas tint the visions of many among the Hmong educated elites in China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and abroad.

This has been an awesome experience for me and a most inspiring learning curve. I thank the colleagues and CA referees who put their priorities aside for a moment to engage critically with this work and with each other in this discussion. Together, the article and the comments offer a patent case of the whole becoming bigger and sounder than the sum of its parts. I am very grateful for this and trust that we are all the wiser for it.

—Jean Michaud

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