

**HOUSES OF HMONG PEOPLE:  
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS**  
(The Case Study in Phong Lai Commune, Thuan Chau District, Son La Province)\*

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"A house" in the broad meaning is not only an architectural work for shelter but also demonstrates cultural and social value, including aesthetics, religion and beliefs, exchange and passage of knowledge, health care and protection, hierarchy and relations in family life as well as among families and communities and the society. As a result, human psychology, character and intellectual values are formulated and enriched. Regarding houses of the Hmong ethnic group in Vietnam, general research was conducted by Nguyen Khac Tung (1993), Cu Hoa Van and Hoang Nam (1994), Tran Huu Son (1996) and Diep Dinh Hoa (1998). Specific research on the Hmong's houses in Yen Bai province's Mu Cang Chai district and Lao Cai province's Sa Pa district was carried out by Vi Van An (2001), Mai Thanh Son (2001) and Tran Thi Thu Thuy (2001). This paper does not go into technical details and architectural aspects but focuses on cultural and social facets relating to houses of the White Hmong people in Phong Lai commune, Thuan Chau district, Son La province.

**I. SEVERAL FEATURES INFLUENCING HOUSES**

**1. Geographical positions and natural conditions**

Phong Lai commune is bordered in the east, south and north by Chieng Khoang, Chieng Pha and Muong Giang communes of Son La province's Thuan Chau district respectively. In the west, Phong Lai commune borders Tua Tinh commune, Tuan Giao district and Lai Chau province. The center of Phong Lai commune, Thanh Binh village, is a center of neighboring communes; it is located about 13 kilometers from Thuan Chau district center and 50 kilometers from Son La province town along National Highway No 6.

Located in the humid tropical climate zone and subjected to effects of altitude and strong wind blowing in from Laos, the winters are bitterly cold. The lowest temperature is around 0°C with a typically misty and dry climate. The regional ethnological and climate conditions have a particular impact on Hmong traditional houses, insisting on the creation of unique features. For instance, low-roof and windowless houses are to prevent cold wind and mist from entering, which may cause indoor moisture and fungus. This design also keeps kitchen smoke indoors to ensure warmth and to chase away mosquitoes. The roof typically slopes downward to speed up draining of rainwater, making itself less subject to heavy weight and collapse.

As the commune is located close to the Son La and Lai Chau provinces' border at the foot of Fadin mountain pass, the highest pass of Highway No 6 linking Hanoi and northwestern provinces, and due to its unfavorable terrain, forest makes up the majority of the commune's land area. It is estimated that each village in the Phong Lai commune occupies no less than 1,000 hectares of forest. The locality boasts a rich fauna and flora, which is not exploited as in other areas. The commune has many precious wood trees, including *pinus khasya royle*, *chuknasia tabularis A.juse*, *pentacetonkinensis gagnep*, *dinh huong* and *tau* which are much sought after for house construction by not only Hmong but also other ethnic groups. However, forest exploitation in the area is alarming as many Hmong families have cut down trees and transported wood by modern means to serve building purposes or for sale to other ethnic groups in the same region.

**2. Economic conditions**

As a result, the Hmong people's economy in Phong Lai commune has experienced major

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changes, which are not seen in most northern mountainous regions, especially the Hmong populated areas. Besides traditional economic activities such as uphill cultivation, blacksmithing, hunting and livestock breeding, major development has taken place in the plantation of industrial trees, fruit trees, medicinal plants, and most recently, in the farm economy. Most of these economic activities are profitable, thus significantly raising local people's living standards. According to a survey in two Hmong villages of Mo Cong and Nam Giat, 34 households are classified as rich (14/66 households in Mo Cong and 20/73 in Nam Giat), 81 households are of middle income (42/66 in Mo Cong and 39/73 in Nam Giat respectively), 19 households are rated poor (8/66 in Mo Cong and 11/73 in Nam Giat) and only 5 households are classified as impoverished (2/66 in Mo Cong and 3/73 in Nam Giat). Improved economy serves as a major condition for new house building.

### 3. Cultural and social characteristics

Phong Lai commune is home to 3 ethnic groups. Census in the year 2000 showed that 770 households or 4,995 people resided in the commune. 236 households or 1,350 people were Hmong, living in 7/19 villages. 183 households or 1,235 people were of the Thai ethnic group, living in 8/19 villages. 351 households or 2,410 people were of the Kinh majority, living in 4/19 villages of the commune. According to this data, in Phong Lai commune, Hmong people make up 27.02% of the communal population, and 100% of them belong to the White Hmong group. 90% of the Hmong population in the commune has the family name of Sung. The remaining 10% bear family names such as Thao, Giang, Vu, Mua, Lau and Ly. The Hmong population and number of Hmong households in Phong Lai commune has developed rapidly. In 1990, there were 70 households with a population of 445 people; the numbers in 1995 were 119 and 959 respectively, in 2000, 214 and 1,350 respectively. Obviously, the burgeoning number of households and population directly relates to exploitation of natural resources to meet living purposes in general and house building in

particular, including household expansion and house reparation.

The Phong Lai commune boasts a relatively well-established educational system. Primary schools can be found in villages. The commune has 2 junior secondary schools. Senior secondary (high) schools students may study at the provincial boarding schools. Phong Lai's educational level is relatively high in comparison with other Hmong localities. In the 1999 - 2000 school year, in Mo Cong village alone, 187 children went to school, of whom 135 studied in primary schools, 38 others (6 male and 32 female) studied in junior secondary schools, 12 studied in high schools, and another 2 pursued graduate studies.

In addition, the commune residents have access to health clinics and a village-based healthcare system, post offices, markets, industrial tree and coffee hybrid supplying centers. The commune has gained access to electrical grids, thus, becoming a center of surrounding communes. On top of that, road networks have facilitated traffic and goods transportation for local people. National Highway No 6 crosses the commune. Inter-communal roads have been of good quality. Especially since the state funded road repairs in 1996, automobiles can reach several villages in the commune.

Obviously, the natural, economic, cultural and social conditions mentioned above have both direct and indirect impacts on housing and social culture regarding houses of the Hmong ethnic group in Phong Lai commune.

## II. TYPES OF HOUSES AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT

The Hmong ethnic group in Phong Lai commune has many ways to classify houses. Based on their functions, houses can be categorized as those for shelter (*tre nho*), storage (*xa*), communal houses (*tre cou*), rice-field houses (*tre te*), stables for cows and buffaloes (*tre nhu tre tu*), hen-coops (*chong kai*), pigsties (*gua bua*), etc. Based on the time of their construction, houses can be classified by style: traditional, new-style or mixed. In this regard,

criteria concerning materials, architecture, interior decoration and the builders are usually taken into consideration. In addition, Hmong people developed the concept of the rich house and the poor house. This is a broad concept, which not only covers relevant criteria mentioned earlier but also implies human capability and assets kept in that particular house. This essay examines types of the Hmong houses in Phong Lai commune in accordance with time of construction and their changes.

### 1. Traditional houses

This type of house is understood to have been present for a long period of time. Construction materials are mostly taken from the surrounding environment, e.g. wood, bamboo, rattan, reeds, etc. The building preparation and construction are managed by Hmong people, in which communal support in terms of materials and labor contribution plays a key role. Construction techniques mostly involve chopping and shaping wood by axes and knives. House frame is established and linked by a beam roof structure. Each structure has one roof beam, two purlins, one tie beam and 2 collar beams crossing each other and supported by the other beams and tie beam. The structure is consolidated by timber joints either made by carpenters or as advantage of natural wood joints. Beam roof structures are reinforced by tie beams, angle braces and posts.

Traditional houses are built on a ground foundation, consisting of three compartments and two lean-tos (gabled roofs). The main compartment (on the left-hand side if looking onto the front from outside) is divided into 3 parts: the first facing-front wall is the bedroom for the host and his wife, the mid-section is for an oven and kitchen, the back part is for storing kitchenware and home appliances and is a dining-room. A sub-door is constructed at the gabled wall of this compartment. In the kitchen, there is a relatively large attic for storing seeds, food, rattan craft products and cooking implements. The main door is constructed right at the front wall of the central compartment, or worshipping compartment. The space close to the main door is for storing sewing and silk

worm growing tools. The backroom space is always unoccupied as it is reserved for men to have meals and family worshipping rituals. On the backroom wall there is an altar for home spirits and another altar for the spirit of worshipper or shaman, if any family member practices. The main beam is the ridge purlin of the roof structure in the central or worshipping compartment. In the guest's compartment (on the right-hand side if looking onto the front), the space close to the front wall is divided into bedrooms for sons and their family; the space close to gable wall is used for unmarried children; the central space is used for guest reception. Guests' beds are placed close the backroom's wall. The house has no windows. Walls and partitions are wooden boards with rough surfaces, as they are only hand-whittled by axes. There are two relatively large lean-tos in the two ends of the house. These lean-tos are for children to play, for storing light production tools, airing soya beans and corn, or storing food-processing tools such as a rice mortar or a corn-hulling mill.

The Hmong traditional houses of different lineage in Phong Lai commune differ. For instance, in several houses of Vu and Mua lineage, the main compartment is on the right and the guest's compartment is on the left, if looking on from the front, consequently, sub-doors and the main beam are on the right, not on the left as in houses of other lineage. In general, Hmong house have only one main-beam located in the center of the host compartment and of the central compartment; this is used for both males and females, but in some houses of Mua and Thao family lines, two roof beams of the structure next to the central compartment are main beams, the one on the host compartment is for males, the other on guest's compartment is for females. This difference is seen in not only traditional houses but also Hmong new-style houses in Phong Lai commune.

Another traditional model is the temporary house. These houses are basically similar to traditional houses in terms of construction materials, builders, construction techniques and architecture. However, a temporary house is

comprised of only 2 small compartments with walls and partitions made from bamboo (see picture 1). This house is mostly for newly married couples who begin to live separately from their parents, or old childless couples. Based on our survey in Phong Lai commune in 2002, very few traditional Hmong houses remain. For instance, in Mo Cong village, only 2 among 66 houses are categorized as traditional, and both of them are temporarily built for newly married couples who have left their parents' home to begin an independent life.

## 2. New style houses

The first new style houses appeared in Phong Lai commune in 1990. The surface layout of new style houses is mostly the same as in traditional houses. However, the new style architecture has become more and more similar to houses of the Kinh people. The new style house still has a ground foundation. It has four compartments, two lean-tos, one main door, two sub-doors at two opposite gabled walls as well as windows in guest's compartment. Several households still build indoor kitchens which do not have attics; instead they just set up a shelf-like frame beyond the oven for storing food or medicinal plants. Mostly, local people build kitchens and attics in a separate room at the gabled area and next to the central compartment. However, some kitchens are built close to the house. Most local people build kitchens away from the house, ensuring the latter's double lean-to characteristic. The new-style house's beam roof structure has four beams, excluding the structure having the main-beam, which then has 5 beams, including the roof beam as in traditional houses. The new style house is built by the Kinh people from Thai Binh province (lowlanders) with due care. Beams, supportive posts and roof structures are whittled, planed carefully and fixed by dovetails. Wooden boards are also cut and shaved to ensure a smooth surface. For construction materials, timber and bamboo are still taken from nature. The roof is covered with Huong Canh tiles sold by the Kinh people in Thuan Chau district center or Binh Thuan village, the communal center. Some local families can build houses with iron roofs

supported by the State. Some years ago, Mr. Dia's brothers bought tile machines of the Kinh people to produce tiles; they do not use these tiles, but sell them to the Tai ethnic group. Hmong people still use tiles made by the Kinh ethnic group. As time goes by, these houses continue to be built with changes to the design or the use of new construction materials.

## 3. Mixed style houses

We name this type of houses as mixed style as it combines features of both traditional and new styles. All construction materials are taken from nature as in traditional houses, but conditions of exploitation, transportation, construction techniques and house frames are similar to the new style houses; except for the roof, which is designed and covered by reeds like traditional houses because the family cannot afford tiles. Most houses of this style have indoor kitchens and kitchen-attics but some families move them out of the house. As far as we know, houses of this type represent a large proportion of houses in Phong Lai commune. In Mo Cong village, 20 among 66 houses are of the mixed style.

## III. TRADITION AND CUSTOM RELATING TO HOUSE BUILDING

### 1. Materials exploitation

The Hmong people usually use trees such as dinh huong, tro, tau, sung and nghien for house building. After cutting down trees, they divide them into round trunks and number them according to their purpose, then put signs on them to identify top and foot, otherwise, they have to lay the trunks in water for identification. This is a compulsory custom to avoid confusion and violation of rules during house building.

The first day of the trip to get construction materials should fall on the days of dog, dragon, goat and buffalo according to the Hmong traditional calendar. Folklore beliefs have it that dogs usually bring seeds for people and are faithful to protect their master. Dragon is a sacred animal. Goat rarely gets sick and its horn is used for Yin-Yang tossing during rituals. Buffalo is a calm, industrious and helpful

animal, benefiting the host's farm business. It is believed that taking a trip on these days to select materials for building will be lucky. Before cutting down the first tree, the host has to pray and ask for permission from the forest god and the soul of the tree. The ritual master places a rice bowl at the foot of the tree, burns incense sticks and prays to the forest god and the tree soul to forgive his sin and to not cause misfortune for the host family. Then he scatters rice around as invitation of supernatural forces to have meals. Just after this ritual, local people who dare to cut down the tree believe that bad luck will not happen to them or the host family.

Hmong people avoid using trees which have fallen down or withered as it is believed that these trees have been used by some supernatural forces. For example, trees brought down by lightning are believed to be used by the lightning god or identified as property of the lightning god. If a household uses these trees to build a house, they would get bad luck as punishment by supernatural forces. People also avoid using trees with many climbing branches like snakes to build a house, for fear that snakes will climb around these trees and the host family would face bad luck such as sickness and conflict, because snakes are believed to pose risks for human beings. According to Hmong tradition, when carrying a dead body to the burial site, people stop on the way near a tree to worship the spirit, then local people will avoid using these trees for house building, because these trees are of the spirit, otherwise the host family would be punished. People neither use trees which are uprooted or whose top is broken to build houses. It is believed that uprooted trees are weak for house building, thus causing illness, while trees with broken tops do not reproduce, thus the husband and wife may then become a widower or widow, or they would not have children.

Hmong people in Phong Lai commune rarely make use of materials from old houses to build new houses; only families of elderly, lonely and sick people use materials from an old house but they obey strict rules.

## **2. Selection of land and direction of the**

### **house**

In order to build a house, the first priority for Hmong people is to select an appropriate piece of land suitable for human beings and cattle. The person who selects the land should know how to conduct worshipping rituals. He is usually the lineage chief. If the lineage chief cannot come, the father of the house owner or the house owner himself should go if he can handle conducting the worshipping procedure. Local people also go to select land on the days of dog, dragon, goat and buffalo based on the beliefs mentioned above. Before going to the site, the ritual master burns incense, worships and asks the home spirit to help him select a good piece of land. Hmong people usually select a high and airy location surrounded by mountains. The house should lean on the mountain for strength. It would be the best choice if two gable tails look to the mountain peak, as the mountain god would shoulder the house, thus bringing good luck to the host family.

The facade of the house, especially the main door, shall not face the mountain saddle or the peak, otherwise the mountain will "hollow home assets up" and make host property "fly away", or the family will be watched over and harmed by spirits. The facade of the house should not be overshadowed by mountains, otherwise the house will lack sunshine and, consequently, the host family will not enjoy a bright future. Two houses shall not be built opposite each other, especially the central compartment and the main door, for fear that disease would pass from one house to the other and conflict between families may arise. Houses shall not look to a cave or a withered tree, as this would negatively affect husbandry, crops and cause illness for the host family.

When an appropriate piece of land is found, before land-selectors decide this piece of land will be the location of a new house, a cau cu tre ritual is held to pray to the land god for permission to build a house on this piece of land. This ritual, which is organized in twilight right on the spot, may vary from one line to another.

## **3. Traditional custom and rituals in house**

**repairing, building and entering a new house**

Normally, a traditional house needs to be repaired after 10 years. Meanwhile, a new-style house resists longer and only its tiles need to be repaired after that amount of time. In the case of house repair, besides observing the rules of material recycling mentioned earlier, it is essential to replace all tiles or roof reeds if the roof is removed, and materials from the old roof shall not be reused. However, if the roof is not removed, local people may replace only tiles and roof reeds of the damaged sections. If the repairing session does not interfere with spirit shelters in the house, it is not necessary to hold ritual or observe rules, otherwise, ritual must be held. For the home spirit, main beam spirit, door spirit and kitchen's spirit, a cock is offered. For the room spirit, which is considered a female spirit, a hen is offered. If the host is able to handle the ritual, he will do it himself, otherwise the lineage chief or a shaman is invited to conduct the ritual. Chicken is boiled and incense sticks are burned in spirit shelters to ask for permission to repair these parts of the house.

A new house is built from high to low, from exterior to interior parts. For instance, supportive beams around the house shall be erected before the main beam, then dovetails are fixed, tie beams and posts installed, finally the roof is constructed. In case a house is built on a new piece of land, the first construction day shall fall on the day of the dog, dragon, goat or buffalo in a hope of good luck. If a new house is built on an old piece of land, local people avoid digging and throwing soil there or adding new soil to the old piece of land, as it is believed that the home spirit is accustomed to the original piece of land and changes could make the spirit upset and no longer support the host family.

Regardless of whether a house is built on an original or a new location, the host family should obey the rules. The first part of the house to be erected is the main beam – the spirit beam, then the worshipping compartment, the central compartment and two guest compartments. Local people believe that the main beam - the spirit beam - is the backbone of the house; thus

if it stands firmly, the house is strengthened, family regulation is observed and family members live together in harmony. For wooden beams, the foot should be buried underground with the top facing upwards. For beams lying from the left to the right side of the house, the feet of the beams are placed at the host's compartment, and the top at the guest's compartment. For beams lying from the front to the back of the house, the feet of the beams are placed at the backroom wall and the tops on the front wall. Building a house on a new piece of land requires fewer rituals than building on the original location, as a new location does not have much spirit. However, it is necessary to check time carefully to make sure the launching-time matches with the age of the host the first day of building a house and erecting the main beam. Storehouse and buffalo stables shall not be built close to the backroom wall, but near the gabled wall or at the front and closer to forest than to the house itself.

During the preparation process, materials used to make parts relating to spirits (such as the main beam, main door, wooden boards to make the backroom wall of the worshipping compartment) shall not be stepped over, especially by women. The host should keep these materials in a safe place and forbid anyone to step over them. When taking these materials out for use, the host should assign some people to watch over them. Any pieces of material which are not carefully kept should be replaced with a new one, otherwise the spirit would dwell there and punish the host family for lack of respect. After the house is built and before a new house's ritual is held, local people avoid crossing over or stepping over parts of the house where a spirit resides to ensure that the host family does not face bad luck stemming from the new house.

In the construction process, family members - especially the host and his wife - shall not have conflicts or verbal fights, otherwise couples living in that house will always have conflicts. The host family also avoids having conflicts with builders, regardless of whether they come from the same or different lineage, within or outside the community, for fear that workers

would "cast a spell" by hammering a nail in the beams, especially sacred beams, or place a harming talisman on top of beams and roof posts. In this case, the host family would face misfortune such as sickness and disease of their domestic animals, perhaps causing them to be weak and infertile. From the time a piece of land is selected until the new house ritual is completed, local people avoid having bonfires or doing kitchen work indoor, especially in the worshipping compartment. If this rule is violated, the host family has to invite a shaman to hold rituals and pray for forgiveness from the land god and the home spirit, otherwise family members will suffer from sickness and even death. The host family has to slaughter a cow or a big pig and establish a temporary kitchen in the central compartment to hold a worshipping ritual.

Before holding a ritual to welcome the spirit to the new house, the ritual master has to sweep away evil spirits and ask for permission so that the host family can do kitchen work in the new house. During the ritual to chase out evil spirits, the master holds burning firewood and one dipper of water, standing at the main door to chase away all evil spirits hiding in the house so that they cannot do harm to the host family and new evil spirits cannot enter the house. In a ritual asking for permission to build a new kitchen, firstly the host family brings some water through the sub-door to the place they intend to build a kitchen, in hopes that water will bring about peace and development, or that the house cannot be burned in the future, as water represents coolness and reproduction. The ritual master takes a flame from a burning fire of the host's parents or brothers, then comes into the new house through sub-door to the place of future kitchen, praying: today, the host prepares to make a new kitchen, the kitchen god approves and creates good luck for the host family. He scatters some water on the burning firewood but does not put it out completely, then places the firewood at the site of the future kitchen. The host family now can build a kitchen here. After the kitchen is built, the host family burns incense sticks in the kitchen, expressing thanks to the kitchen god. Since fire is lit in this new kitchen,

the host family is allowed to move in and stay. After settling down, the family holds a ritual welcoming the spirit to come into the new house. These rituals differ from one case to another.

In case of household expansion, the host family must wait until the traditional new year to hold these rituals (similar to new house ritual). During this time, the extended family still worships at their parents' or brothers' house, where they used to stay. In case a new house is built on the original piece of land or a family moves so far away that they cannot return to the old house to welcome the spirit to the new house, the host family has to remove all spirit altars in the old house, wrap them up carefully and hide them, thus preventing other people from seeing or touching the altars. During construction time, if the host family has to live temporarily in another family's house, they must ask for the latter's permission to bring the host's spirit in and, if possible, ask the latter to offer a reserved place to keep the host's spirit. After the construction work is finished, the host family will welcome the spirit back to the new house. During this ritual, the ritual master attaches or fixes these spirit altars to the appropriate places of the new house within one day. This ritual should be performed by the lineage chief, if for some reason he is not available, the host's father or the host himself have to handle the ritual; if they do not know how to handle the ceremony, a shaman is invited to conduct the ritual. In case a new house is built on the village's territory, the spirit reception ritual shall be held within 2 days of the completion of construction work. This ritual shall be conducted by the lineage chief or the host's father.

#### **4. Community characteristics in house construction**

It can be argued that the Hmong is an ethnic group with relatively close community cohesion; it is reflected in many aspects, including community support for the construction of a new house. After preparing all of the construction materials for traditional houses, the host family reports to the village chief again, who then informs the village and assigns villagers to offer help. Excluding families facing special

situations, each family usually assigns 2 persons (one male and one female) to offer help. They usually try to build the house within one day. Men normally perform tasks relating to house structure, frame erection and roof tiling while women weave reed crafts, carry light materials for men and cook meals.

For new-style houses, all construction is assigned to builders. The roof is made by earthen tiles or iron plates and transported by tractors, thus not many people are required to help as in construction of traditional houses. Moreover, as construction work for a new-style house could last for one month, daily work requires just a few men to help builders carry logs and some women to take charge of meals. Therefore, in the process of preparation and house building, the host family actively asks appropriate persons to handle particular types of work.

For both types of houses, villagers help and the host family does not pay for that help. If possible, the host family invites helpers to have meals though it is not compulsory. However, the host family must invite all of the people who offer help to join in on the housewarming.

#### **IV. FUNCTIONS OF THE HOUSE**

##### **1. Daily functions**

The first function of the house is a place for shelter, to rest and have meals. According to Hmong people, they previously lived in caves and then gradually developed houses. A house firstly serves as a place to live, to stay when traveling back and forth, to have a rest. Its second purpose is for religious rituals and gatherings. Hmong people's houses, whether traditional or modern, are clearly divided into separate parts for family members and spirits. Each part of the house has unique rules that shall not be violated (please refer to religious and belief functions).

A house is a place for family members to get together, talk, discuss businesses, have meals together, have a rest or receive guests. However, there are strict rules regulating dining. A house is divided into two areas for having meals, one in the central compartment for men and the other

in kitchen for women and children. However, for breakfast, all family members may have meals together in kitchen, though this should be avoided when the family receives guests. During meals, the male host sits at one end of the food tray, facing the main door with his back facing the worshipping wall. Children take seats alongside. If the lineage chief is present, he should take the host's seat. Children and junior members should not have food or drink before the father and other senior members. Young and junior members wishing to have food on the tray must first offer invitations. Though many researchers conclude that the Hmong women are ranked lower than men in the family, we observed that good dishes are always reserved for women and children; in the men's food tray, good dishes are reserved for the elderly or important persons. In funerals and worshipping ceremonies for disease treatment, Hmong people strictly follow rules regulating particular food reserved only for worshippers and musicians.

A house is also a place for family members and guests to have rest. Besides religious restrictions, Hmong people have the following regulations regarding rest in their house: children can let their friends of the same gender sleep overnight in their house but friends must sleep in guest beds. If the daughter and son-in-law visit the host family, they are allowed to sleep in the guest compartment but are forbidden to sleep in other places, especially the worshipping compartment, the host's compartment and other couple's bedrooms. Hmong people avoid letting adults of opposite sex who are not husband and wife sleep in their houses, even they are guests of honor. Hmong people also avoid letting children sleep in the storehouse, for fear that villagers may criticize the host family for being poor and not observing custom. They also avoid letting guests sleep in the storehouse for fear that villagers will abandon the host family due to inappropriate treatment of guests. Therefore, when guests visit the host family, children may sleep in other houses or even in the storehouse to reserve a bedroom for the guests. In this case, the host family is respected by villagers. Guests of the

female host, though they are male, are usually received in the kitchen even though they would be able to sleep in the guest's compartment. In the case that guests of the female host ask for medicine and ritual administration, no matter how far the guests have traveled, and regardless of their sex and relations with the female host, they can only tell the host their symptoms and ask for medicine inside the kitchen.

Hmong people avoid lying lengthwise, putting beds or lying in the worshipping compartment, as it is believed that this is how the dead lie and where the home spirit resides. If someone lies this way, ancestors and the home spirit may think that person is dead and take his/her soul away; consequently, that person will die. Bedrooms should not face the backroom wall of the house, as it is believed that this place is reserved for spirits. When sleeping, family members lie with their heads facing the main door and legs facing sub-doors in a hope that they will be supported by the main-door spirit. The host's bedroom should be in the host's compartment, close to the worshipping compartment, as a sign of respect and in hopes that all domestic spirits will protect family members. If the male host or his wife dies, the eldest son (and his wife, if he has one) will live in this bedroom and become hosts of the house, if his father or mother is still alive, s/he will move to sleep in the guest's compartment. After that, if the mother gets married again, she will follow her new husband; if the father gets married again, he and his new wife will move back to the host's compartment and become host of the house again. If there are more than one couple living in the house, the bedroom of the eldest son and his family will be next to worshipping compartment, then come the next sons, the youngest son and his wife will sleep next to gable wall.

Except for the female host, all women in the family are not allowed to climb up to the kitchen's attic and the roof structure consisting of the main beam. Daughters-in-law are not allowed to enter the bedrooms of their father-in-law and brothers-in-law; similarly, the latter are not allowed to enter the bedrooms of daughters-

in-law and sisters-in-law. Sons-in-law are not allowed to enter bedrooms of his wife's parents or sisters. Similarly, the latter are not allowed to enter bedrooms of their sons-in-law or brothers-in-law.

## 2. Religious and belief functions

A house is not only a place to reside and to conduct economic, cultural and social activities but it is also a shelter for spirits and ancestors. Therefore, it is a place to hold religious rituals and rituals regarding beliefs, to observe regulations concerning spirits and ancestors, to wish for good luck and to avoid misfortunes.

### 2.1. *Spirits to be worshipped indoors, related to regulations and rituals*

In the Hmong belief system, there is a body of spirits to be worshipped inside the house with different corresponding regulations and rituals. Most noteworthy are home spirit, main-door spirit, main-beam spirit, room spirit, kitchen spirit, worshipper spirit, shaman spirit and dong spirit – farm field spirit.

Home spirit (Su ca): one of the most important spirits for Hmong people, linked with beliefs about money and property, crops, health, and reproduction of humans and animals. Its altar is a joss-paper attached to the backroom wall of the central compartment. Previously, this joss-paper was white; now some families attach red votive-papers of the Kinh people or even real notes. Chicken blood is applied on this joss-paper. During Traditional New Year festival, feathers from a red cock's neck are glued on this joss-paper as offerings to the home spirit on this occasion. The number of feather bunches differs from one lineage to another: Vu and Mua lineage use 3 bunches, Sung line uses 6 bunches, Thao line uses 4 bunches. Normally, the home spirit is worshipped once a year during the New Year. On these days, the host family replaces the home spirit's old altar with a new one.

Worshipping gods: the male host burns 9 incense sticks and holds them in one hand, the other hand holds the sacrificed cock. He stands in front of the altar inviting gods to accept these family offerings. Then he puts the incense sticks

into the bowl of rice, cuts the cock's throat and its blood is taken away immediately. The cock is given a few minutes to toss around before it dies, then it is cooked for worshipping. Hmong people in Lao Cai province believe that if the cock dies with its head facing the altar, the host family will see many good luck; if its head faces the main-door, the host family may face many risks (Tran Huu Son, 1996: pp. 44-45).

**Worshipping ancestors:** The host family holds a ritual to worship ancestors the next morning. The lineage chief must chair or be present (if the host cannot handle the ceremony) at this ritual. In case the lineage chief cannot attend, one man from the lineage chief's family must be present at this ritual but he does not necessarily have to chair the ritual. The chicken used as an offering in previous day's ritual is re-boiled and chopped into pieces which are then put into a bowl of chicken soup. The host family places bowls of meat, baskets of rice and spoons (how many spoons depends on each lineage) and one cup of alcohol on a food tray. This food tray with all the offerings is put in the middle of the home-spirit's worshipping compartment. One bottle of alcohol is placed next to the tray. Many small chairs are placed around the tray alongside of the backroom wall for ancestors to "have a seat". The ritual master calls names of dead family members. After each name is called, he pours alcohol, offers rice, meat and chicken soup and prays for a year full of good luck for the family.

Hmong people believe that if the wooden board carrying home spirit's altar collapses (either on its own or due to human causes), it means the home spirit "falls" and cannot support the host family anymore. Thus, the host family should make pork offerings to pray and ask the home spirit to "stand up", thus preventing supernatural forces to harm the host family. If the altar collapses on its own or due to family members, the host family should sacrifice a pig. If people who are not host family members cause the altar to collapse, s/he must present a pig to the host family as an offering.

**Main-door spirit (Da kho trong tra):** is

worshipped at the main-door. The Hmong altar consists of 3 pieces of joss-papers with chicken blood applied to them attached to the main door. Some families attach red-colored cloths on the altar while worshippers hang a goat's horn or some fur from a goat's head on their main-door altars. The Flower Hmong people in Hoa Binh province attach a square piece of red cloth on the main-door's upper ledge. Hmong people believe that door spirit "guards the door", prevents evil spirits from entering the house and doing harm, defends the souls of family members, prevents these souls from going away and protects domestic animals and property. Hmong people also believe that if a mother who has given birth to a baby less than one month prior, a woman during her menstrual cycle, if a dead body is carried through the main-door, a family member has an accident or domestic property is lost, etc goes through the main door, then the door spirit has "fallen" and cannot defend the host family anymore. If any of these cases happen, the host family has to hold a ritual to "help the door-spirit stand up".

In daily life, Hmong people avoid lifting the main-door away from the house structure, because this is only done when a family member dies. If this rule is violated, someone in the family may die afterwards. Local people also avoided using weapons, spiky objects or sticks, to stab, chop, beat, hammer or kick at the main-door, where the spirit resides. Local people avoided sitting on, leaning against or hanging objects, especially dirty ones, on the main-door for fear that the spirit could be killed, injured or fall so that it no longer can support the host family, or for fear that it could get angry and perhaps punish the host family. In case of a violation, outsiders have to grant offerings and family members have to slaughter their domestic animals to pray for the main-door spirit – that it will be in good shape and not cause misfortune to the host family. Local people believe that without this ritual, the host family would face misfortune such as sickness or death, crop failure and poor husbandry.

**Main-beam spirit (Gie dang):** On the main-

beam there is a joss-paper with chicken blood applied to it; this is the place to worship the main-beam spirit. Hmong people believe that souls of living persons in the family reside in the main-beam and ancestors also take a rest here when they visit the host family. The placenta of a boy infant is buried at the foot of the main-beam. Also, before taking a dead person to their burial site, a worshipper leads the soul of the dead person here and asks for "a coat" for reunion with ancestors. Hmong people believe that main-beam spirit decides life and death of family members. Similar to the main-door spirit, Hmong people avoid leaning their backs against the main-beam for fear that the spirit may fall. They also avoid hammering nails, chopping with knives or beating with sticks the main-beam for fear that the spirit will be "injured" or "die". They also avoid handing objects on the main-beam, for fear that the spirit may get "dirty" or "fatigued"; women should not climb on or step over the structure consisting of the main-beam for fear of "offending" the spirit and causing the spirit to "fall". However, the female host is allowed to do this, as she has to climb up there to take food to the family every day. As far as we know, Hmong people in other regions strictly ban women, especially outsiders, to perform such actions.

The main-beam spirit is usually worshipped when a family member is seriously ill, or if one family member beyond 18 years old dies. The dead body is placed close to the main-beam. A wood-wind instrumentalist plays music asking the main-beam spirit to allow the dead person to reunite with ancestors by tossing a Yin-Yang; if the result is one up one down it means that the main-beam spirit agrees and ancestors approve this person to live with them. If the spirit disagrees, i.e. the Yin Yang shows both sides up, tossing continues until the spirit agrees. If the result is both down, the instrumentalist has to burn joss-paper and play some rhythm to please the dead person, then tosses the Yin-Yang object until one up one down result is reached.

Room spirit (Dang Trong): The room spirit lives in a bag woven with white threads which

holds a dried gourd inside. The room spirit is hung on the wall facing the head of the bed of the host and his wife. Hmong people believe that room spirit influences mother's child delivery, health and development of human beings, especially children, and reproduction of domestic animals.

Hmong people hold a ritual to worship the room spirit when in the family, a couple do not have children for a long time, or someone dies or gets sick; domestic animals grow slowly, cannot reproduce or yield babies with birth deformities. Rituals are held by the lineage chief with similar processions in all cases.

Apart from room-spirit, *Ti de hu pli* is a bowl of water to call for the human spirit. This bowl consists of water and a cup placed upside down – conveying the meaning that the soul of the host couple is kept inside the cup. This bowl is hung on a shelf supported by some thread, or steel wire in some families nowadays. The bowl is covered by zigzag-shaped paper with flowers and animal decorations. Hmong people worship *Ti de hu pli* when the spirit of a family member is captured by a home spirit or ancestors. Ritual procession is very complicated with plenty of offerings, such as pigs (the number and size depends on host families and types of spirits to be worshipped, e.g. grand grand-parents or grand parents), chickens, ducks and goats required in each stage of the ceremony.

Kitchen spirit (Dang khau chu): Hmong people believe that the kitchen spirit determines crops and husbandry. To gain a bumper crop and developed husbandry, local people avoid stepping on kitchen ovens, beating or knocking on the kitchen. When pigs are pregnant, ash from the oven where food for these pregnant pigs are cooked cannot be taken out; a stone shall be put in the oven before taking out the pig feed. Local people also avoid over-frying sticky rice cakes or allowing fire in the kitchen during the first 3 days of the Traditional New Year or re-setting fire in the oven. If these restrictions are not observed, domestic animals may catch diseases, produce babies with birth defects; crops may suffer from pests, flood or drought. If

a fire is set during the first 3 days of the Traditional New Year, the host family may face bad luck in the New Year. If the host family allows water to splash on the fire and put it out, rains will delay the harvest of crops.

Worshipper spirit (Thang nenh) and Shaman spirit (Da chua): Worshippers and shamans have their own altars in their houses. These spirits are worshipped on the same backroom wall as the home spirit. The home spirit's altar is usually placed on the left-hand side if looking on from the front. The worshipper spirit's altar is a double-decked wooden shelf: the upper deck holds incense bowls, the lower deck holds tools used for worshipping procedures. This altar is fixed at the center of the backroom wall. On the right hand side is the shaman spirit's altar made by white joss-paper and cock feathers used for worshipping in the Traditional New Year ceremony. The number of feather bunches depends on the worshipper's family name.

Similar to other in-house spirit, these two spirits are worshipped regularly in Traditional New Year festivals. Besides, if someone comes and asks for help from the worshipper or shaman, then a ritual is required to worship these two spirits.

Farm field spirit (Tui senh): Our survey shows that some senior Hmong worshipers here also have dong spirit's altar – the farm field spirit. For example, in Mo Cong village, only Mr. Sung Gia Dia worships this spirit. The altar is a 2-metre wooden post. On top of the post is a rectangular wooden board with four holes to insert incense sticks. The altar is dug underground opposite to the main-door. The dong spirit is worshipped on the 1st day of the Hmong traditional New Year. The host burns incense on the wooden board on top of the post and prays for good crops and husbandry for his family and relatives.

## *2.2. Several traditions and customs of daily life relating to the house:*

In baby delivery: a pregnant woman is allowed to give birth in her own bedroom. The placenta and umbilical cord are buried under the

main-beam if the baby is a boy, or under the bed of the parents if the baby is a girl. After child delivery, local people avoid having strangers enter their house. If there is a violation, the stranger has to leave all his/her belongings in the host's house and can only take them back after one month. The host family hangs some branches of green leaves indoors as a sign of the forbidden act (see picture 4). Relatives and villagers can visit the family but are not allowed to enter the mother and baby's room until the host family concludes the new-baby ceremony. Within 3 days of the birth, the host family avoids bringing burning charcoal and ash out of the house. If there is violation, it is believed that the mother will lose milk and the host family must hold a ritual at a big mulberry tree in the forest to pray for milk for breastfeeding. The ritual master usually brings incense sticks and a cock to the forest and conducts a ritual at the first mulberry tree on the way. First, the ritual master burns 3 incense sticks at the foot of the tree, praying to the tree to share some milk with the baby. Then he cooks chicken, uses a knife to chop 3 times at the tree trunk, takes 3 drops of its resin on a cooker comprised of food, then brings this food back home to serve the pregnant woman in hopes that she will regain milk.

In the wedding ceremony: Before bride reception and bride escort procession, first, representatives from the bridegroom's family are offered seats facing the main-door. Representatives of the bride's family sit opposite. After each topic of discussion, the two delegations change seats with each other. Local people believe that this would make words of both sides recognized by the home spirit and the main-door spirit, thus both families and the newly married couple do not dare to violate what they pledge in the wedding.

Before saying farewell to the bride, who then goes to her husband's house, the bride's family gives the bridegroom's family a black umbrella, implying that the bride's soul is in the umbrella and will go to the bridegroom's house. After receiving the umbrella, the bridegroom's representatives stand in front of the bride's family's home spirit altar and sing a song to ask

for the bride's soul go to new house, thank the bride's parents and invite the bride's family to attend the wedding ceremony. Before leaving the bride's house, the newly married couple and all participants stand in front of the main-door and drink alcohol, so that the main-door spirit witnesses the ceremony, implying that the bride is now married and becomes a spirit of another family; she can no longer return as a host family's spirit.

When the bride arrives in her husband's house, a ritual is held to receive the bride's spirit into the new house. Bride and bridegroom stand in front of the main-door, singing a song so that the old spirit of the bride leaves, then ask that the bride's spirit will be accepted in the new house. Then both come in through the main-door and stand in front of the home spirit's altar. The ritual master holds one cock, one hen and one burning stick of wood over the head of the newly married couple 3 times, then sings a song accepting the new spirit.

In case of the traditional custom of "abduction", this ritual is completed when the "bride" is forced to husband's house. However, during the wedding ceremony, this ritual can be held again in a formal way, but whether or not she wants to be come bride, she has to stay in her "husband's house" as her spirit is already there.

In funeral practices: Hmong people avoid letting those of different lineage – meaning different spirits, including their daughters who are married, die in their house, for fear that the dead person's soul may harm in-house spirits, making them incapable of protecting and supporting the host family. When someone from a different lineage gets sick and may die, the host family establishes a hut outside the house and carries the sick person there, then informs the guest's family to come and bring the guest back home, or bury the guest if s/he dies. However, people who are not relatives and just meet each other once but share the same lineage or the same spirit may die in each other's houses; the host family would hold a funeral as if the dead person was their relative.

The dead body is laid out in the worshipping compartment. Just after death, the body is placed lengthwise, with its head facing the main-beam and legs facing the home spirit's altar. After a ritual asking in-house spirits to allow the dead person to be brought out and after getting approval, the host family places the dead body on a "horseback-like rack" alongside the home spirit's altar wall, with head facing the sunrise direction so that the dead spirit knows the time to get up and work. Contrastively, Mua lineage places the dead body with its head facing the home spirit's altar and its legs facing the main-door. The body is carried out with its legs first. Dead adults are taken through the main-door while children go through the sub-door. During this procession, the door shutters are removed, making it easier to take the body out. After the burial service, attendants are required to warm up their hands by a fire in front of the main-door, to prevent evil spirit from entering the house and doing harm.

For people suffering from accidents that need to be brought indoors for treatment, the blood on their skin must first be wiped away. They are then brought into the house head first, thus, if the victim dies, the funeral can be held as normal. In case the victim dies outside the house, it is possible to bring the dead body in for a funeral service, but the door shutters must be removed. Then the host family must hold a ritual informing in-house spirits of the misfortune and asking for their permission to hold funeral service for this victim. Only after getting approval from in-house spirit, family members can cry and conduct funeral procedures.

### **3. Economic, social and cultural functions**

Besides the initial function of shelter offering a place to stay, new functions in the economic, social and cultural areas develop gradually to meet the diversified needs of human beings.

In the broad meaning, a house also includes yards and gardens, warehouse and farms. Therefore, as far as its economic function is concerned, it is worth mentioning poultry, orchards, vegetables, medicinal plants and food preservation activities in and around the house.

Hmong people store food such as corn and soya bean in the front yard or lean-tos. No matter what type of house it is, a large attic is a must for storing seeds, food and stocks of handicraft products. Local people also process food for daily meals, the occasion of festivals or guests inside the house. Each family usually has a separate space in lean-tos or in the kitchen for placing rice mortar and maize-hulling mills, tools for processing of agricultural products used in religious rituals or rituals pertaining to beliefs, rice, cakes and alcohol used in daily meals as well as feed for domestic animals.

The house is a place for gathering, receiving guests, rituals, worshipping and performance of the arts. Normally, the house is for family members to gather, share good and bad experiences, discuss and make internal decisions, for grandparents and parents to educate and care for their children, and for children to enjoy themselves. In special events such as traditional New Year festivals, wedding ceremonies, funerals, rituals, child deliveries or other important activities, the house is a place for receiving relatives and friends to discuss best solutions, to share experiences in daily life and production, for seniors to give advice to junior members. The house is also a place for rituals and folklore art activities such as dancing, singing and flute performances. These activities would help improve mutual understanding and cohesion between family members, lineage members and villagers, or people from different communities, for sharing knowledge, thus creating joy and confidence in a bright future. The house is a place for villagers to pay a visit, encourage and help the host family in difficult times or misfortunes such as funerals, sickness, or aging and loneliness; it is also a place for people to visit and share joy and support the host family in wedding ceremonies, child deliveries, housewarmings and traditional New Year festivals. The house is a place to receive and pay respect to people of the same or different lineage, who have established close relations with the host family or those who meet for the first time. As a result, a well-established community psychology is formulated not only in a lineage and a community but also between

different communities.

## V. HOUSES IN CHANGE

### 1. Basis for change

The first and foremost basis for change, in our view, is economic development and transition. The first new-style house was built in Phong Lai commune in 1990, 4 years after the “doi moi” process (renovation policy) was launched. New-style houses have become popular since 1994. As mentioned earlier, during the doi moi process, thanks to appropriate economic development policies such as merchandise oriented restructuring of plants with a focus on coffee trees, mulberries for silkworms, medicinal plants, fruit trees; granting of rights to use land and forest; promotion of farm economy, technical, hybrid and capital support policies, Hmong people in Phong Lai commune boast a higher income and more diversified products than their counterparts in other regions. Cultural and social factors serve as the second important basis. As noted earlier, during the doi moi process, Phong Lai commune has witnessed not only economic development but also social and cultural advances, particularly in healthcare and their educational system. Given this economic development, local people's income has gradually developed and become stable. On the other hand, as the healthcare and educational system develops, local people have become aware of developed needs and conditions for usage of mosquito nets. Local people now can place objects leaning on the main-door and main-beam, hang objects on the main-beam or even on the main-door ledge without fear that spirits will do harm as in the past.

Our survey shows that Hmong people's view on architectural, aesthetic and functional characters of houses has gradually changed, now revealing orientation on the beauty, convenience in daily life and durability. Hmong people usually disguise these reasons under explanations that they have to build new-style houses to avoid embarrassment when receiving guests.

Change in the natural environment is the third

important basis. Particularly forest exploitation leads to more serious scarcity of natural construction materials. However, this is not the most important driving force behind changes in Hmong's houses in Phong Lai commune, as forest areas and construction materials such as wood and bamboo are relatively abundant. Natural resources of construction materials are not only sufficient for house building but also for sale. Only reeds for roof tiling are more scarce than previously.

## 2. Changes in houses

External modulations, which are easiest to recognize, are architectural and material changes: As mentioned earlier, a new-style house has 4 compartments and 2 lean-tos. Some houses have only one lean-to as the kitchen is built next to one gabled wall. Some houses have the backroom wall of guest's compartment stick out. New-style houses usually have 2 sub-doors at two gabled walls and windows in the guest's compartment. The roof structure in a new-style house has 4 beams. Especially the roof structure between the worshipping compartment and host compartment has 5 beams, as it consists of the roof-beam or spirit beam (some houses of Mua and Thao lineage have two roof structures like this), and two roof beams. New-style houses are more spacious with more open-air than traditional houses as the base is higher, the roof is not low and steep, more windows and sub-doors around the house, no kitchen or kitchen attic inside the house. There is a major change in construction materials. More and more houses have roof tiles and iron tiles in place of reed tiles. Some families use cement mixed with sand and straw to make walls instead of using wooden walls. On the technical side, builders make dovetails to link wooden structures, smooth surface of planks and beams, and cut planks by sawing machines. As a result, new-style houses look better and more durable than traditional houses, in the local people's view. Although architecture, construction techniques and materials are subject to major change, surface layout ensures meeting daily needs according to Hmong tradition and custom.

Changes in community values in house

construction: Currently, in the construction of traditional houses, villagers help each other in material preparation and construction. However, in exploitation and transportation, they use modern tools such as a chainsaw, wood-cutting machines and tractors, thus not as many people are required as previously. For new-style houses, besides using modern tools to transport materials, roofs are made from iron tiles completely produced by the Kinh builders. Consequently, community cohesion and the role of village chief have diminished largely compared to construction of a traditional house. Previously, men played a key role in the construction process. Now they take part in exploiting a proportion of materials and mostly help builders in construction process. Previously, women went to get reeds, made reed handicraft materials, brought materials to help men build houses and cooked meals. Now they mostly prepare food for the builders. However, relatives and friends still help each other in house construction by granting loans in terms of cash, cows and buffaloes, pigs and food without charging interest. Villagers present the host with some home appliances such as cookers, dishes, bowls and tea-sets at housewarmings.

Changes in facilities for daily life: Together with changes in houses, several daily home appliances change accordingly. For taking a rest or sleep, the Kinh people's beds began replacing traditional Hmong beds, which consisted of a bamboo knitted board resting on 4 temporary posts dug into the ground. Moreover, most families use blankets, mosquito nets and pillows. In receiving guests, local people have chairs and tables, cupboards, tea-sets and vacuum flasks, as the Kinh people, in the guest's compartment instead of around a fire as previously. During family reunions, guest reception, festivals and ceremonies, people gather here to discuss and make decisions. At daily meals, utensils such as bowls, spoons, chopsticks, pans and cookers as well as cupboards are used more and more commonly. Then, there is a need to keep these utensils clean and to have meals hygienically.

Changes in house surface layout for daily activities and functions of the house:

In most Hmong houses, the kitchen and attic have been built outside the house. Therefore, functions such as food preservation, termite prevention, keeping warm and mosquito chasing no longer remain. Moreover, moving the kitchen and kitchen attic outside, raising the height of house, building more windows make houses more clear, clean and tidy are all beneficial. Religious and belief changes in houses also take place with the physical and structural changes. For instance, women now can climb up to the attic as it is no longer an internal part of the house and linked to main-beam. Restrictions relating to pregnant woman and mother and children, such as having meals with family members, still prevail but are not strictly observed as in the past. Child delivery violating custom and tradition is allowed to proceed in the backroom yards or lean-tos; some wooden boards at the guest compartment are removed to let mother and child enter the house even before the baby is one month old. Some families even allow the mother to give birth in the indoor kitchen. Sick people facing deadly situations are no longer taken out of the house but still receive care from the host family. If s/he dies, the host family would hold a funeral as usual.

Houses are now used to hold meetings with people from different ethnic groups or officials, even foreigners. Regarding religion and beliefs, in-house spirits and related rituals and restrictions are still observed, but in a less complicated way; some rituals and restrictions no longer exist.

It could be argued from this presentation that the Hmong house is a combination of a series of cultural, social and economic factors. Despite changes in architecture, surface layout and activities inside the house, cultural and spiritual rituals are still performed according to long-standing tradition and custom. This phenomenon is also observed in other aspects of the Hmong life, such as cultivation methods, income sources, having meals, dressing and traveling, etc. It could be said that these are contributors to adaptation given changes in living environment, at the same time, creating a unified culture in diversification and a solid community cohesion of the Hmong ethnic group. Although many

researchers have examined Hmong people in general and their houses in particular, deeper research into this topic should be carried out.

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