

Tentative panel title: The Father Yves Bertrais Collection and Reflections on Hmong Language and Literacy

Chong Moua

From Orality to Textuality: The Meaning of Writing

As someone interested in the production of literature about Hmong people, the thousands of letters that were sent to Father Bertrais and his OMI mission in Thailand are a unique source of how Hmong people write about themselves. The letters are from Hmong people from all over the world. Most of them are written in the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA) that Bertrais himself helped create and disseminate. Many of the letters ask for materials to help them gain or improve their literacy in the Hmong RPA script. But interspersed within these letters are other letters about Hmong history, the conditions of Hmong life, life in the refugee camps, and oppression by the Thai, Lao, and Vietnamese. With the development of the Hmong RPA writing script in 1952 by Father Bertrais, William Smalley, and Linwood Barney, and subsequent proliferation to Hmong populations mainly through Bertrais and his mission, Hmong people had a way in which they could turn their personal histories and experiences into textual, documented accounts that have the potential to reach a wider audience than ever before. These letters reveal the ways in which some Hmong have made attempts to conceptualize Hmong history, contributing to an already growing field of writings about Hmong history, culture, traditions, religion, and experience. The significance, however, is that the letters are from Hmong people writing about their own history and experiences, using their own voices and language, transforming their stories from the oral realm into the textual realm. This shift in the mode of documenting, reporting, and sharing historical evidence by Hmong people is significant for how scholars, Hmong and non-Hmong, will produce knowledge about the Hmong. These letters and the Bertrais collection speak directly to my interest in how Hmong people use the modern technology of writing to write about themselves and what it means now to have the ability to write and create a peoplehood into being on text.