

Agency from the margins: interdisciplinary perspectives on modern transformations among the Hmong of upland South East Asia

James Scott's infamous *Art of Not Being Governed*, for all its faults, has undoubtedly raised the profile of South East Asia's highland groups, calling for a shift away from a state-centric obsession and towards a perspective of social phenomena from the hills. Of all the diverse cultures and histories of Zomia's highlanders, Scott's thesis is perhaps most relevant to the tumultuous migration history of the Hmong, an ethnic group of some 4-5 million spread across the borderlands of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand (plus significant diasporas in USA and Australia). Infamous for their controversial role in the CIA's 'secret war' in Laos, Hmong speakers are often marginalised, impoverished and treated with suspicion by the various states they currently live in. Their complex historical legacy and strong ethnic identity has given rise to some fascinating social phenomena in recent times, including mass Christian conversions in the face of government hostility, human trafficking and transnational marriage networks, commoditisation of culture for tourism and everyday resistance to state assimilation projects.

This panel explores the surprising agency of the Hmong in South East Asia – and their impact of wider regional socio-political transformations – from the diverse perspectives of anthropology, political science, human geography and ethnomusicology.

Convenor:

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