

LEUANGTENG DONG: ANALYSIS OF A HMONG SONG

Paula Stefanini

Contact: stefaninipaula@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is an analysis of ‘Leuangtengdong’, a Hmong song melody which was recorded and transcribed by Jähnichen in 2000, while documenting a collection of Hmong songs in Laos. This new article is an effort to analyze melodic patterns of the song while considering its historical and social contexts through the personal gaze of the author with a specific background in singing and social experience. It is important to mention that the language sung in the song was unknown and that the emphasis of the analysis is on the musical shape. Finally, there is a conclusion regarding this song fitting in Jähnichen’s hypothesis on Hmong song melodies which states that most musical phrases do not repeat; all lines are different in pitch, order and length; pitch order and intervals can indicate a specific type (of song); singers do not know which type they sing, only analysis shows; and analysis cannot prove ethnic groupings. "Very interesting is the general characteristic of generating absolutely individual melodic lines in each example and in all the other recordings there was no one song with a repetition of a single melodic line. Avoiding repetitions is therefore a remarkable sign of Hmong song melodies." (Jähnichen, 2011: 126). The given core hypothesis was the point of departure in this analytical article.

Keywords

Hmong, Wedding song, Pitches, Intervals, Tonal language

THE COLLECTING OF THE SONG

In order to analyze this, or any other song, I find a need to understand the context in which the song was or is used and collected, therefore I will briefly introduce the circumstances in which the recording was made.

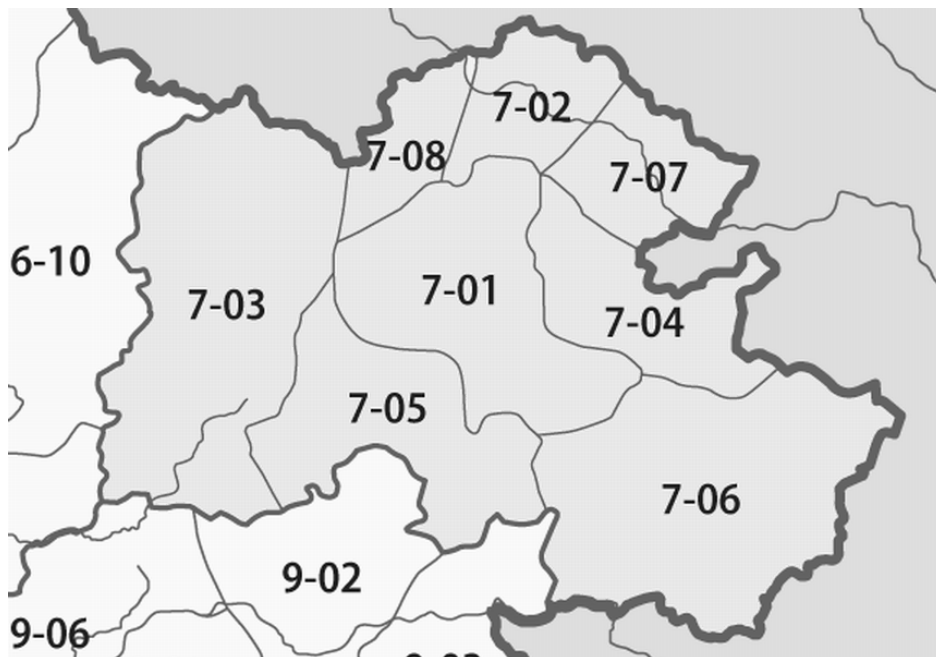


FIGURE 1: Scheme of the province Huaphan in Laos. The village Ban Vanglom where the song was collected in the year 2000 is in the district 7-01 (Scheme open source, modification by the author).

On January 2000, Jähnichen and her colleagues were traveling in Laos to record Hmong songs with the purpose of providing accessibility to these songs and analyze them. On the previous month, December 1999, they had already been to Phonsavanh, Muongkhoun and Nonghet, observing Hmong festivals such as 'Pig's and Cow's Day' and 'Buffalo Fights' as well as recording their songs. By January, they had reached Sam Neua and on January 14, they went to Ban Vanglom, where they observed the New Year's festivities and recorded several more songs, including the song analyzed in this article. The performer was an approximately 70 years old man and the equipment used in the recording were two microphones Sennheiser MD 425 and a SONY DAT handheld recorder.

THE SONG'S FUNCTION AND CONTEXT

"Types of song melodies are very important to different Hmong groups living on the Southeast Asian mainland." (Jähnichen, 2011: 85). There are historical, religious and cultural functional contexts in which the songs are performed. Some Hmong songs tell the story of their migration to Southeast Asia, others are sung in everyday life events—such as a mother singing to her child—and finally, songs have important social functions in ceremonies such as the 'Ball-Playing' courtship during the New Year's festivities. These songs have been orally passed on from generation to generation. The analyzed song is an old wedding song named "Leuangtengdong" which can be translated from the Hmong language as: Leuang (meaning, story, contents), teng (getting married) and dong (eastern, others, loud). Weddings involve the singing of many special songs and are rites of great importance to the Hmong people living in that area. "Certainly, the four major categories of Hmong rituals—New Year and Marriage, Death and Shamanism—account between therefore the greater part of the many customs, or kevcai, which the Hmong have, and are rightly concerned to preserve and transmit" (Tapp, 1989: 89).

THE HYPOTHESIS ON HMONG SONG MELODIES

After collecting 189 recordings of Hmong musical activities, Jähnichen transcribed and analyzed a selection of 24 songs which led to this hypothesis:

1. Most musical lines are not repeated.
2. All lines are different in pitch order and length.
3. The pitch order and intervals can indicate specific type (of song).
4. The singers do not know which type they sing, only analysis shows.
5. The analysis cannot prove ethnic groupings.

When looking at this melodic construction (FIGURE 1), it was observed that none of the phrases are repeated and the pitch range is under one octave, more exactly a minor 7th—from C3 to B3 (Do to Ti or Si¹). In a micro analysis of the first four phrases, when comparing the intervals between all of the pitches, I observed that there are only four types of intervals in the song. The predominant intervals are: Perfect 4th, which appeared 24 times, and Major 2nd, 17 times out of a total of 51 intervals in the first 4 phrases as the following table in FIGURE 2 demonstrates.

¹ This cultural translation helps imagination when being familiar with it. It is not used in any other analytical context given in this article.

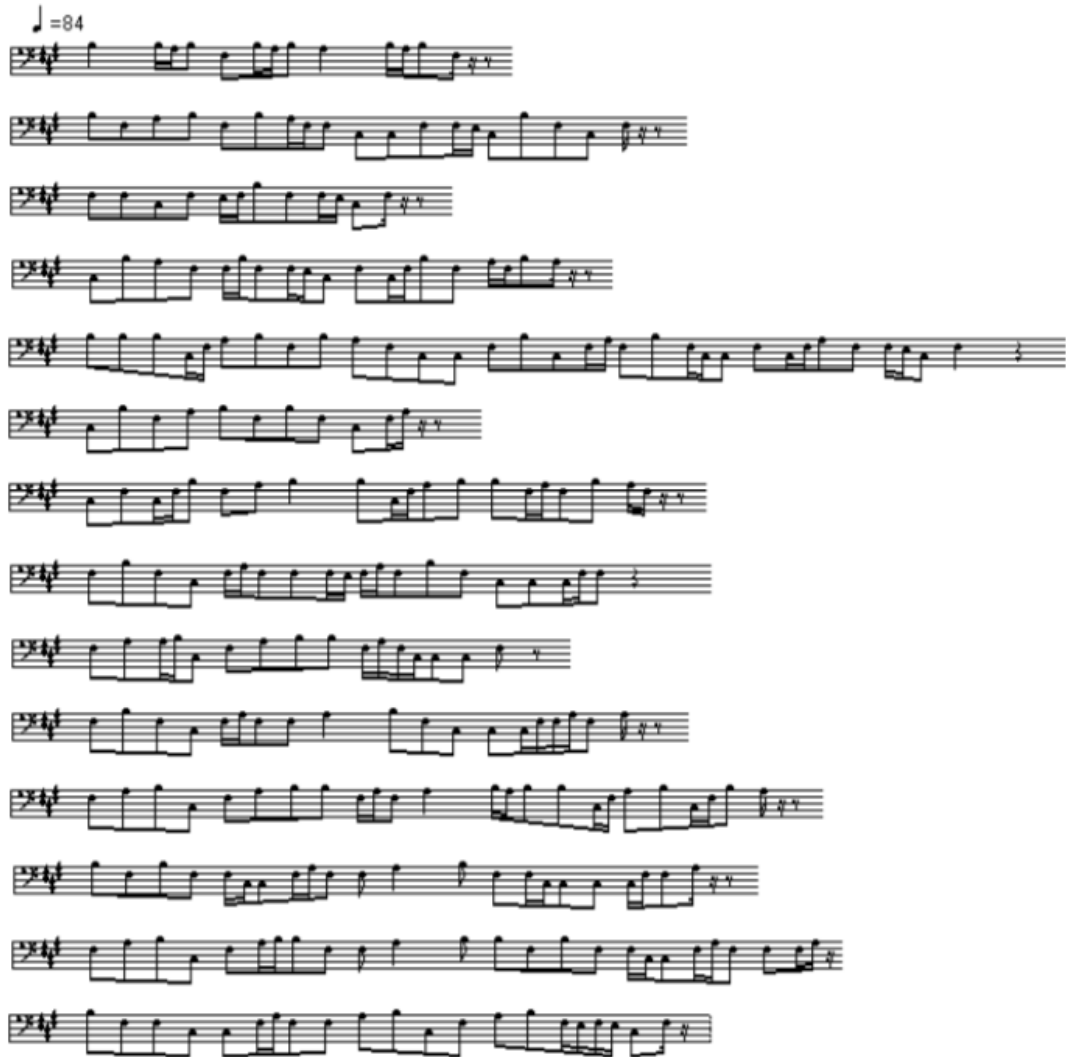


FIGURE 2: Transcription of Leuangtengdong by Gisa Jähnichen, 2000.

Phrase 1	Pitches:	B, A	A, B	B, F#	F#, B	B, A	A, B	B, A	A, B	B, A	A, B	B, F#					
	Intervals:	M2	M2	P4	P4	M2	M2	M2	M2	M2	M2	P4					
Phrase 2	Pitches:	B, F#	F#, A	A, B	B, F#	F#, B	B, A	A, F#	F#, C#	C#, F#	F#, E	E, C#	C#, B	B, F#	F#, C#	C#, F#	
	Intervals:	P4	m3	M2	P4	P4	M2	m3	P4	P4	M2	m3	m7	P4	P4	P4	
Phrase 3	Pitches:	F#, C#	C#, F#	F#, E	E, F#	F#, B	B, F#	F#, E	E, C#	C#, F#							
	Intervals:	P4	P4	M2	M2	P4	P4	M2	m3	P4							
Phrase 4	Pitches:	C#, B	B, A	A, F#	F#, B	B, F#	F#, E	E, C#	C#, F#	F#, C#	C#, F#	F#, B	B, F#	F#, A	A, F#	F#, B	B, A
	Intervals:	m7	M2	m3	P4	P4	M2	m3	P4	P4	P4	P4	P4	m3	m3	P4	M2

M2 = Major 2nd, m3 = minor 3rd, P4 = Perfect 4th, m7 = minor 7th

FIGURE 3: Table demonstrating the pitches and intervals in order (compiled by the author).

It was also observed that eight out of 14 phrases end in the pitch of F#. Not that the key center is relevant, but the relationship between the tones might be. If this song was to have a center key, as any familiar Western music known does, it would be the key of F# minor and in that case, all of the of pitches in this song are heard as if they belong to an F# minor pentatonic scale. The interval order is seemingly not simply coincidental, something in the history of this music has led to the choice of these intervals.

The minor pentatonic scale, as taught and used in some countries with a focus on formal Western music education, is a five-degree scale derivative from the natural minor scale². The natural minor scale being a seven-tone scale containing the degrees of 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7, in comparison with the major scale of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. The minor pentatonic simply leaves out the degrees of 2 and b6, therefore remaining the 1, b3, 4, 5 and b7 (FIGURE 4).

Degree of the scale	1	b3	4	5	b7
Key: F#m	F#	A	B	C#	E

FIGURE 4: Table demonstrating the degrees of the F#m pentatonic scale as perceived by the author.

Rhythmically speaking, the patterns reappear many times in the song, but with variations and not always in the same place in a phrase. As demonstrated in the marked tone groups (FIGURE 5):

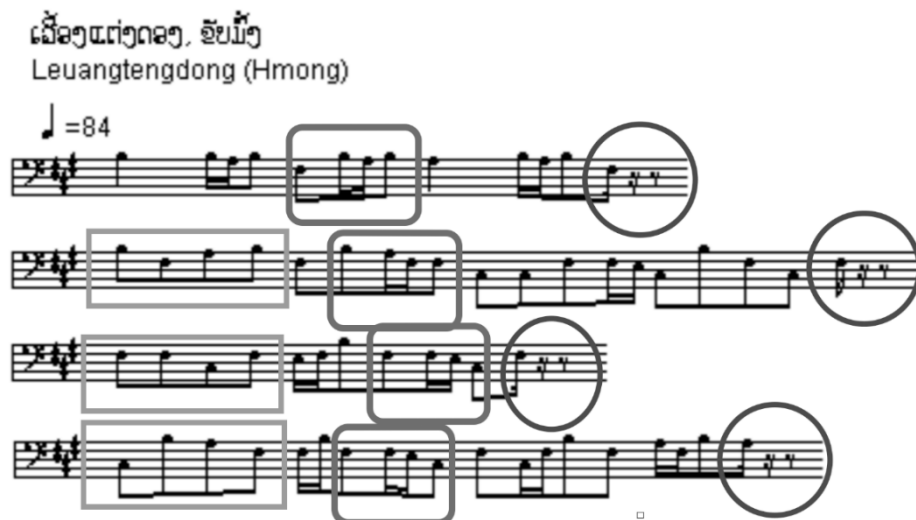
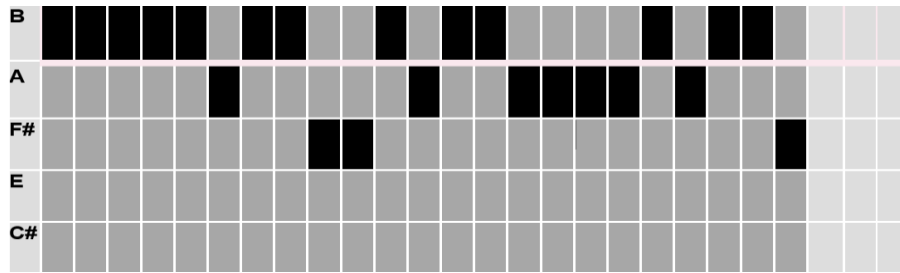


FIGURE 5: The first four phrases with rhythmic similarities of the analyzed song as transcribed by Jähnichen, 2000.

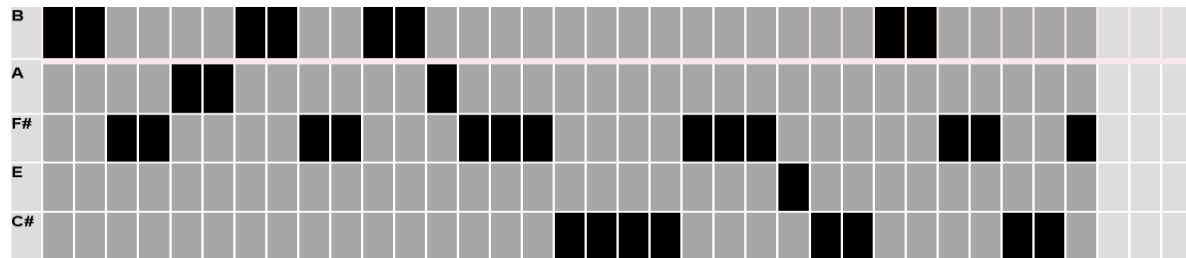
The next image series (FIGURE 6) shows that the melody of the phrases form wave-like patterns that are small in range and since the song only utilizes five different pitches and never repeats the same note in different octaves, the same pitches appear repetitively.

² I am aware of the fact, that all scales taught in my previous educational context, are constructed scales, even if they are called 'natural'.

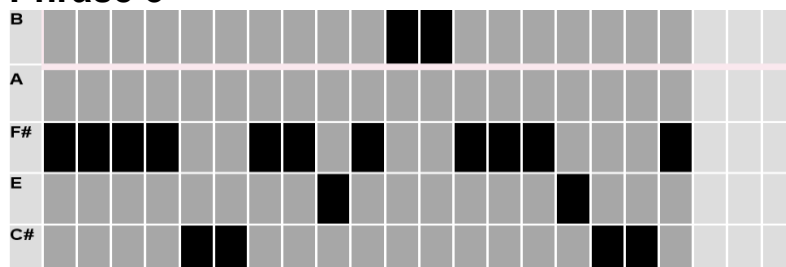
Phrase 1



Phrase 2



Phrase 3



Phrase 4

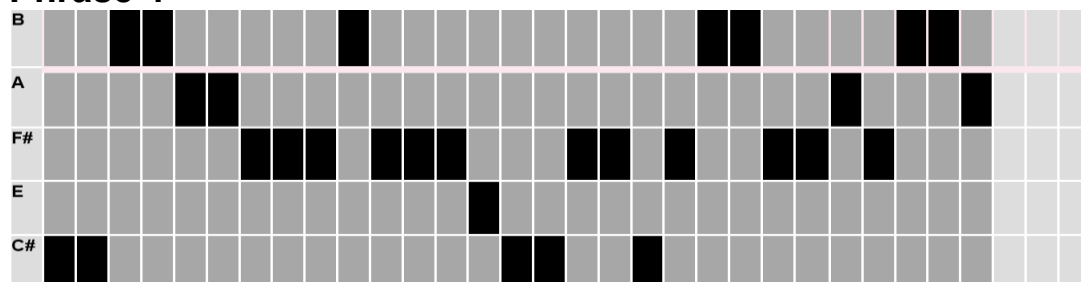


FIGURE 6: Table of melody, darker cells represent the tones in that pitch level (vertically) and duration (horizontally, 1 cell = the sixteenth part of a bar), light grey cells represent rests (presentation by the author).

Since the Hmong language is a tonal language and the pitch is probably, but not necessarily, correlating with the speech tones, it is fair to deduce that the melody can be related to the tonal structure of the words. When analyzing the spectrogram, I observed a higher intensity on the last tone of every phrase of the song, as can be seen at the end of phrase one (FIGURE 7).

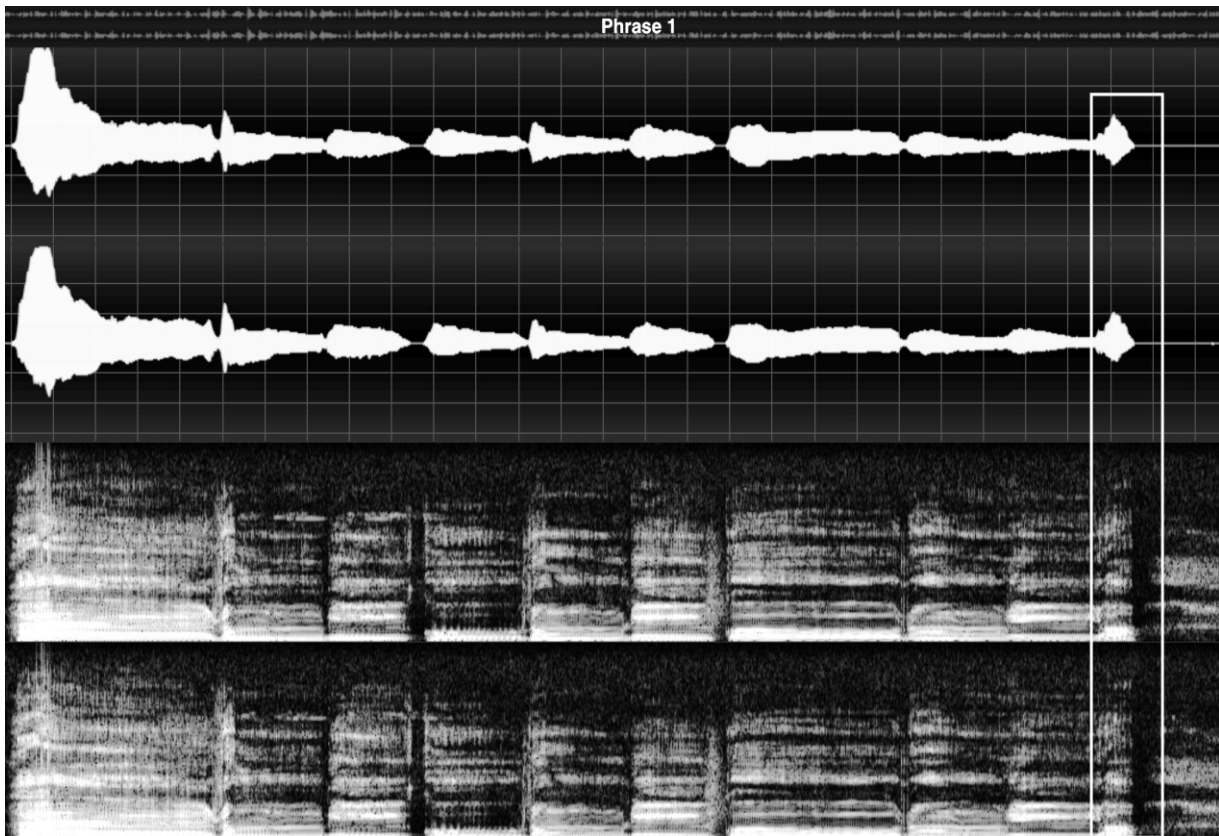


FIGURE 7: Spectrogram of the first phrase of the song (presentation and visualization by the author).

This intensity on the last tone, might indicate shortness of breath of the particular performer, however, without another version of the same song or knowing the words, it is difficult to conclude if this rhythmic pattern was influenced by a shortness of breath or if this was done on purpose to emphasize those words.

LISTENING TO THE SONG THROUGH MY EARS

Listening to this song was a new experience to me, without understanding any of the lyrics and having no previous experience with any music that resembled this. What I heard was a melody that was soothing and perhaps cheerful, and very repetitive in types of intervals. The voice of the performer sounds as the voice of the older man that he was. I'm under the impression that sometimes he rushed through some sentences to catch a breath, but without knowing the words I cannot know that for sure. Sometimes he took his time to remember a next phrase before beginning a new sentence, but that can be irrelevant since these performers are not considered to be professional singers. The constant repetition of intervals and rhythms makes me think that maybe the song describes a sequence of tasks or expectations to be fulfilled by a bride or a groom, or both. However, I reiterate, these are just impressions of ears that do not understand any of the words sung in the song.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, many of the observations I made through the analysis of this song were also observed in other Hmong wedding songs performed in Thailand, “They possess a range of minor 7, the note group to 5-6 notes, the pentatonic scale (...)” (Boonyanant, 2013: abstract). This could

mean that either these songs have one single origin and were faithfully passed down by previous generations, or that these songs have been more recently modified and uniformed by contemporary forms of communication between different Hmong groups in distant locations.

None of the phrases repeat identically, but they share many similarities in rhythm and pitch. Since their monosyllabic words are inseparable, the difference in the length of musical phrases can be explained by the fact that each text phrase was written according to the meaning of a story and without trying to match a number of syllables on each phrase.

I am convinced that the performers simply repeated songs that have been taught to them by previous generations. I don't suppose they studied the songs they sing in an analytical or written form. Hmong groups in Laos have become refugees, moved from place to place, and lost all their belongings so many times in the previous decades that it would be incredibly difficult for them to have obtained the skill of writing music, not to mention keeping those scores intact. I believe that their methodology of learning songs and keeping them alive for the new generations was in 2000 as it had been for a past that cannot be counted. Nonetheless, they obviously need to practice the songs via repetition so they can learn, perform and teach them.

On the documentary *Disappearing World: The Meo* (Lemoine, 1972: 19:00-19:23) the shaman sings a song very similar in melody and structure to the song 'Leuangtengdong' that is here analysed, showing that some imagined or real shamanic ritual songs and wedding songs may share several characteristics discussed before — non-repetition of phrases, five pitches, small range, and repetitions of same intervals.

It is clear that the non-repetition of phrases is a characteristic of Hmong song melodies. It is difficult for an analysis of songs to "prove" ethnic groups when at any time back in recent or far away history, these songs could have been brought from one group to another and since these groups don't live in complete isolation from the rest of the world there is very big probability that their music has been inspired and or modified by external exchanges and appropriations. This is a fact in the Hmong culture as it is in all cultures, nevertheless there are certain characteristics to a song that can lead to believe that a specific version of a song could come from a specific place, time, and therefore culture. And for this Hmong song, the non-repetition of melodic phrases, the minor 7 range and the use of only five pitches — belonging to the imagined pentatonic scale — are characteristics that can link music to an ethnic group. If that can be taken as a proof is still open and needs further discussion, especially as the definition of what 'ethnic' means beyond the use of a joint language or some ingrained habits connected to working patterns in a specific place. This analysis is, seen from this perspective, not yet satisfying.

REFERENCES

- Barber, Martin and Lemoine, J. 1977. Two Letters from Indo-China. *RAIN*, (21), 1-6. DOI: 10.2307/3032117.
- Boonyanant, Klen. 2013. Vocal Music in Hmong Wedding Ceremony at Ban Rong Kla in Phitsanulok. Abstract of unpublished conference paper.
- Catlin, Amy. 1997. Puzzling the text: Thought-songs, secret languages, and archaic tones in Hmong music. *World of Music*, 39(2): 69-81.
- Jähnichen, Gisa (2011). Study on Local Typology and Individuality of Hmong Song Melodies. *Studies on Musical Diversity: Methodological Approaches*. Serdang: UPM Press. 85-130.
- Lemoine, Jacques and Moser, B. 1972. The Meo (Anthropology Documentary). *Disappearing World*. at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aykbu-ImfKM>, last accessed on 11 February, 2021.
- Ratliff, Martha. 2007, April 6. Hmong-Mien languages. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hmong-Mien-languages>, last accessed 13 February, 2021.
- Tapp, Nicholas. 1989. Hmong Religion. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 48: 59 - 94.
- Tapp, Nicholas. 2010. Hmong. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hmong>, last accessed 16 December, 2020.