

# Cultivating the Ethnographer's Ear\*

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Throughout the history of anthropology, fieldwork has stood at the center of our discipline. In this article I argue that fieldwork not only produces anthropological knowledge, but also engages the ethnographer in cultivating specific bodily experiences, personal emotions, and the professional self or identity. I will discuss my ethnographic apprenticeship, studying Miao (Hmub) courtship in a village in Guizhou, to recount my sense of learning and understanding human experience and social construction in that cultural context. By reflecting on my bodily cultivation during fieldwork, especially the processes of listening and writing, both key experiences of a field ethnographer, I explore how the interaction between what I heard and wrote during my observations transformed my internal understanding of both the specific culture and my self. It was not simply the content or sonic patterns of late-night knocks on windows that inscribed meaning, but the *hearing* experience that linked personal emotions and transformed them as they related to my identity as a fieldworker. That knocking made it possible for me to move from a sense of culture shock, fear, and dislocation to one of familiarity and sympathy with the emotional worlds of young Hmub girls.

Keywords: senses, bodily cultivation, apprenticeship, fieldwork, Hmub

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Would I be able to relive those feverish moments when, notebook in hand, I jotted down second by second the expressions which would perhaps enable me to fix those evanescent and ever-renewed forms? I am still fascinated by the attempt and often find myself risking my hand at it.

[Lévi-Strauss 1992 [1955]: 62]

But what of the ethnographic ear?

[James Clifford 1986: 12]<sup>1</sup>

In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Lévi-Strauss more than once mentions his field experiences with Indians in Brazil, experiences that linked him emotionally and intellectually to his identity as an anthropologist. Those fieldwork descriptions have not always earned accolades from peers and colleagues, but as an ethnographer who has also experienced cultural learning during fieldwork, I can attest that I am still touched by Lévi-Strauss' vivid accounts of trying to find a place in his mind to explore human knowledge in the context of changing indigenous cultures. We are still witnesses to the enormity of his effort: 6,000-plus drawings and copious field notes from multiple Brazilian field trips, all in support of the data, observations, and hypotheses he offered.

This paper will consider my own ethnographic apprenticeship while studying Miao (Hmub)<sup>2</sup> courtship in a village in China's Guizhou Province. I will explore how the interaction (or lack thereof) between what I heard and wrote during my observations transformed my internal understanding of both this specific culture and my self. I will also examine the issue of whether the record that flowed from my pen truly reflected the reality captured by my eyes and ears, and if not, what I missed.

Many times during my fieldwork I asked myself *what* to listen for and *how* to hear it. Like many anthropology graduate students, I had little training in listening and hear-

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1 The term "ethnographic ear" was first used by Nathaniel Tarn (1975). In describing his experience of doing fieldwork in a multi-lingual community he wrote: "It may be the ethnographer or the anthropologist again having his ears wide open to what he considers the exotic as opposed to the familiar, but I still feel I'm discovering something new in the use of language here almost every day. I'm getting new expressions almost every day, as if the language were growing from every conceivable shoot" (ibid: 9).

2 I am using the Eastern Miao romanization for Hmub terms, in which the final consonants are not pronounced but indicate tones.

ing beyond learning the importance of transcribing interviews. Most graduate training focuses on a combination of watching and speaking with study participants. Despite the lack of formal training in listening, I had no choice but to practice hearing/listening techniques, especially when my study focus shifted to nighttime courtship practices. While analyzing my field notes, I unexpectedly discovered that they conveyed a mix of detailed visual and aural descriptions, which sparked my realization of the importance of auditory cues in Hmub courtship, as well as the methodological challenges and epistemology of cultural fieldwork. That recognition has led me to examine how my Hmub experiences might fit into current discussions of the senses in anthropology, the technology of self, and ethnographic apprenticeships.

### **Senses**

According to Paul Stoller (1989), it was through his long-term apprenticeship learning Songhay spirit possession rituals that he discovered the centrality of sound in understanding cultural sentiment:

One afternoon in 1970 in Tillabery, the haunting cries of the monochord violin drew me over a dune to witness my first ceremony of Songhay spirit possession ... The sounds of these instruments so impressed me that I continued to attend possession ceremonies in 1971 ... In 1977 I began to learn about the sounds of spirit poetry in the village of Mehanna. Two years later I was invited to join in the Tilaberi possession troops as a "servant to the spirits" ... *Throughout this myriad of experiences, my teachers continually focused my attention on the sounds of possession.* [Stoller 1989:101, emphasis added]

However, Stoller also noted that sound dimensions are more often than not ignored in current Western anthropological sensory training. We learn how to interview and observe, but focusing on sounds or voices associated with events and determining how they fit into the ethnographer's observations and interpretations of a local culture are overlooked as teachable skills. Still, Stoller and others remind us that the senses employed in anthropology or ethnography should be more diverse, that tone and sound are invaluable for describing and interpreting local cultures. If we are fortunate, we learn through our own apprenticeships the lesson Stoller learned in his work: that paying attention to sound helps ethnographers make sense of local meanings by engaging the communication and interaction of bodily senses.

### ***The Technology of the Self***

Foucault (1988: 18) uses the term “technology” to address the means through which individuals are “trained and modified.” He lists the four major kinds of technology as production, sign systems, power, and the self (ibid.). After “insist[ing] too much on the technology of domination and power,” he expressed new interest in the technology of the self, and used the historically contiguous relations between the expressions “know yourself” and “take care of yourself” as a departure point to show how relations between care and self-knowledge were constituted in Greco-Roman and Christian traditions (ibid.: 19-20). Foucault argued that it was due to different forms of “care” in relation to the self that different forms of self exist (ibid.: 22). According to his analysis, writing in the Greco-Roman tradition was an important device in the invention of the concept of “taking care of the self” (ibid.: 27). Examples include taking notes for re-reading, writing treatises and letters to help friends, and keeping notebooks for reflective study (ibid.). Thus, the practice of writing is now intimately linked with taking care of oneself. In the same work he uses Marcus Aurelius’s letter to Fronto in 144 or 145 A.D. to illustrate interrelations between self and body through the constant practice of writing “unimportant” daily details (ibid.: 28-30).

### ***Cultivation and Apprenticeship: The Legacy of Foucault, Stoller, and Castaneda***

In line with Foucault’s and Stoller’s positions, I will focus on my attempts to account for what I heard through the act of writing. Just as “taking care of one’s self” emerges from the activity of writing about “unimportant” everyday details in a letter or journal, my experiences in cultivating my ear and adjusting my perceptions occurred through the process of writing about field experiences in my notes and in a diary.<sup>3</sup> I use the term

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3 Although the purpose of this paper is not related to the historical development of writing technologies and the change of the practices and attitudes toward self in a specific historical and spatial context, there are two reasons for me to consider and follow the Foucaultian notion on the relations between techniques and self. First, both are related to the transformation from orality to literacy; second, both examine how certain psychological experiences as well as bodily ones emerge from a specific technique (writing).

*cultivation*<sup>4</sup> because it expresses the idea of conscious and continuous pursuit and of something internal being trained and modified, which I view as analogous to Foucault's "technology of self." In the context of field ethnography, I examine how the technique or ongoing practice of writing affects bodily cultivation, and how it opens a door to self-disclosure and to learning how the sense of hearing is used in other cultures.

An analogous concept, that of *apprenticeship*, is discussed by Stoller (1987) and Carlos Castaneda (1998[1969]). Ethnographers generally consider themselves students or like children—learning other cultures through their fieldwork. Few make explicit use of the term "apprenticeship" in ethnographic practice. Stoller (1987) describes his two apprentice experiences as learning the perspective of a Songhay individual and the perspective of a ritual specialist. The first experience occurred during the early stages of his fieldwork, when he encountered frustration from what he felt were misleading responses from Songhay villagers to survey questions. He then received advice from a village friend: "You must learn to sit with people, Monsieur Paul. You must learn to sit and listen" (ibid: 11). Stoller acknowledged feeling ambivalent about his professional identity as a fieldworker and taking a passive approach to learning Songhay ways. However, the practice of sitting and listening proved key to his acceptance as a qualified Songhay person, to "have acted and have become a person in the village" (ibid.: 17).

Stoller's (1987: 21-41) second fieldwork apprenticeship benefited from Songhay sorcerers. Following an intensive period of memorizing ritual texts and praise poems and of procuring folk medicines, he experienced intense internal conflict between his roles as a sorcerer's apprentice and anthropologist:

Djibo immersed me in memorization. So busy was I with the memorization of texts that I did not have time to figure out what they meant, let alone how they corresponded to the vagaries of Songhay culture. I worried that I was failing in my mission as an anthropologist. [Stoller 1987: 38]

Another example is Castaneda's (1998[1969]) description of his apprenticeship under the guidance of a Yaqui Indian sorcerer named don Juan, who forced him to give up

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4 According to Gove et al. (1986: 552), to cultivate means "to improve by labor, care, or study, bring to culture, civilization, refinement ... to cause to grow by special attention or by studying, advancing, developing, practicing, publishing." Merriam-Webster (1984: 203) states that cultivation is "often preferred to culture because it suggests the continuous pursuit of culture and self-discipline which accompanies such pursuit, rather than its achievement, and therefore more modest and often more appropriate."

his Western way of thinking and adopt certain practices in order to learn and understand the reality of the Yaqui world. According to Castaneda,

In don Juan's system of beliefs, the acquisition of an ally meant exclusively the exploitation of the states of non-ordinary reality he produced in me through the use of hallucinogenic plants. He believed that by focusing on these states and omitting other aspects of knowledge he taught, I would arrive at a coherent view of the phenomena I had experienced. [Castaneda 1998[1969]: 10]

Castaneda encounters considerable challenges in his efforts to refrain from professional methods that his Indian mentor forbids, including interviews, observations, and systematic note taking. Still, field notes played a significant part in his internalizing the sensual experiences of the Yaqui Indian and understanding their worldview, disclosing his subjective perception of the experience and revealing the content of don Juan's belief system. Although Castaneda never extends his discussion to the link between writing and his Yaqui cultural apprenticeship, several times he states that writing notes after calming down from extreme sensual experiences allowed him to examine those experiences more closely.

Before discussing the importance of careful listening as a primary field technique, I will describe my training in cultural anthropology research methods at Taiwan's Tsing Hua University and present a brief analysis of how sounds and/or voices play an important role in the daily and ritual lives of upland Hmub villages, especially their central position in ritual courtship behavior. In this paper, "sound" (non-linguistic construction) means a system of symbols for communication (Feld 1982)—for instance, the sound of a person knocking on a door or window. "Voice" will refer to a linguistic construction by social persons, such as human conversation or other forms of dialogue (Keane 2000).

## Learning and Experiencing Anthropological Methods

I began my ethnographic training in the early 1990s. Through course work, reading, and seminar discussions, I built an understanding of what was required for fieldwork: learning new languages, drawing maps, performing censuses and/or genealogies, doing interviews, participating, observing, writing notes, and perhaps also keeping a diary. At that time, H. Russell Bernard's *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (1988) was one of the most popular titles on this subject. My copy was never far away, either during my course work or at a field site where I did ethno-medical research involving the Ami

indigenous group living in Hualien County on Taiwan's east coast (1992-93). In chapters 7-13, Bernard discusses data collection-participant observation; taking and managing field notes; structured, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews; questionnaires and surveys; and direct, reactive, and unobtrusive observation. All these methods of obtaining information emphasize visual perceptions. The terms *hearing* and *listening to* rarely appear in Bernard's text. Specific listening techniques are rarely, if ever, discussed in anthropology classes, but I believe it is possible to teach accurate listening techniques when addressing such processes as transcribing, translating, categorizing, describing, and interpreting both verbal and nonverbal auditory messages or signals.

Under the influence of my professors and Bernard's text, standard observation, interviewing, and participation procedures were my primary tools during my Ph.D. fieldwork on Hmub kinship in eastern Guizhou (1998-2000). My initial focus was on village social structure; I conducted a census of more than 300 households and created pedigree and genealogical records for each family using information gathered in semi-structured interviews.<sup>5</sup> I also collected kinship terms used by native Hmub speakers and recorded the actual use of those terms in everyday and ritualized settings. In addition to supporting my understanding of personal relationships in the village, these data helped me learn marital concepts described by my informants, observe marital realities, and determine where the two converged and diverged. My explorations of the interplay between personal emotions and social institutions (marriage, courtship etc.) gave me abundant opportunities to try new ethnographic procedures and techniques.

During my fieldwork I lived in the home of a girl named Ghaif Wangk, a 20-year-old who was unmarried. At first, her family made arrangements for me to sleep on the second floor, but since the second floor room was next to the granary, I asked to sleep in their daughter's room. We spent a great deal of time together, and we eventually started to call each other Sister. She taught me the Hmub language, assisted me with translations, sang and dictated Hmub songs and stories, and helped me with my interview data. The amount of time I spent with her over fifteen months allowed me to understand her experiences and moods, her views on marriage and emotions, and occasionally her views on local gossip. Through her I gained acceptance as a young girl according to local tradition.

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5 According to Barnard and Good (1984), *pedigree* means the recording of basic demographic data on household members (name, age, marital status, birth, etc.). The term of *genealogical records* refers to consanguineal and affinal relations among households, families, and lineages.

## Listening to the Sounds of Late-Night Rituals

While working in my village, I discovered that I needed to take a different approach to my research. In a growing number of situations I realized that if I did not make an exceptional effort to listen to the sounds and voices that one could hear in the dark of night, I was in danger of missing out on critical aspects of Hmub social life and misinterpreting Hmub courtship and marriage customs. The following example is from my field notes at the beginning of 1999:

I heard the cocks crowing two or three times in the darkness. I still struggled to get up at 5 o'clock in the cold early morning. At 6 o'clock, I decided to observe the calling of ghosts for a new house. I woke up Ghaif. Ghaif's mother said that a person with a new house had called the ghosts a few days before. She also said there were some households in Si-Zu (the fourth hamlet in the village) calling ghosts, but she did not know which ones. Ghaif suggested that we go outside to take a look. We didn't wash our faces before leaving, simply took flashlights to go out at dawn. Ghaif said there was noise somewhere there on the slope, but I heard nothing. I followed her to Si-Zu on the slope. As we approached, another person came toward us. After listening to Ghaif's statement, he told Ghaif which household was holding the ceremony. I sensed that he was laughing. Later we found out that he was the *ghet xangt* (the ghost master, or shaman and ritual specialist) who had just finished calling the ghosts and was on his way home.

My field notes, whose contents record my nervousness and anxiety as a fieldworker, especially my fear of losing an opportunity to observe ritual activity, point to the importance of *hearing*. My nervousness can also be explained by my unfamiliarity with hearing the unique sounds and auditory patterns of Hmub rituals. I could not predict the duration of a ritual and had no idea what was being signaled by the sounds I heard.<sup>6</sup> Many of the ritual activities in the village (e.g., rituals for protecting households, for healing, even wedding ceremonies) took place without obvious signs being given by villagers other than the members of the household experiencing the ritual. I remembered thinking

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6 In this article I do not use different terms to distinguish the phenomena of noise or sound. The term "sound" is used here for conveying any non-verbal linguistic signs, which can be heard and can be identified as the indexical signs to "meaningfully" local context of the Fangf Bil Hmub village: e.g., the occurrences of household rituals, the start of wedding ceremonies, or the initiation and practice of institutionalized flirting and courting activities.



upon my arrival in November of 1998 that “I”—the only outsider living in the village—was excluded from the circle in which news was shared regarding ritual activities. Later I learned that I wasn’t so special in this regard: villagers themselves were not necessarily aware of the scheduling of rituals in their own neighborhoods, let alone households in other hamlets. Still, many villagers told me, “If you want to know where a ritual is being performed, just carefully *listen to* the sounds [chanting by the ritual specialists].” However, sorting out the abundance and diversity of auditory signals pointing to ritual activities was a challenge for me, the new apprentice. I needed contextual information from the type of hearing that I was accustomed to in my everyday life.

During my fifteen months of fieldwork I learned the social meanings of specific sounds and voices: the chanting of shamans indicated healing or household rituals; the sound of fireworks meant celebrations for a new year or a wedding ceremony, but sometimes also signaled someone’s death; and the enthusiastic rapping on doors or windows by parallel cousins at midnight indicated that a wedding was to take place early that morning. But it wasn’t until late in my fieldwork that I recognized I had been living in the midst of these sounds and voices since my arrival in the village. Only at that point could I commit myself to exploring the late-night auditory dimensions of Hmub courtship.

To understand the relationship between marriage and courtship outside the kinship structure and village marital system, my second fieldwork focus was eroticism and its emotional contexts. By examining institutionalized courting activities I arrived at an understanding of the emotional world of the *vangt* (young people), as defined locally.<sup>7</sup> While researching courting activities, however, I experienced methodological and ethical conflicts, which increased my sense of how the sounds and voices I heard were significant to my interpretations of Hmub courtship culture.

I was already the mother of two sons when I conducted this research, making me *lok* (old) in the village, and therefore excluded from courting activities. But despite my status as a married mother, the villagers still regarded me as a young girl, perhaps due to my status as a student and the clothes I wore, which were similar to those worn by local

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7 *Vangt* and *lok* are the opposite terms, which could be translated as the meaning of young and old people. The social markers in defining these two terms are marriage as well as being a parent. Any male or female adult without the marital and parental status will be considered as *vangt*. Generally, the people involved in daily courtship are the *vangt*, but on the occasions of festival courtship activities and singing antiphonal songs, there are lots of old people participating in them.

girls<sup>8</sup> who accompanied me during my fieldwork. For this reason I had greater freedom to participate in and observe courting activities, which take the form of gatherings by groups of young males and females or one-to-one courtship at night outside the windows of young women's rooms. I was a direct participant in the group gatherings, but an indirect *listener* to the late-night conversations, filling in the details in later interviews with the girls being courted. I learned that courting activities could be very open—having some features of ritualized performance—but at times they could be very private and personal. Without the assistance of the girls who accompanied me and their willingness to share their romantic emotions and experiences, I never could have understood the content and value of institutionalized courtship in the minds of individual participants.

The Hmub term for courtship is *iut fub*, literally “wandering in the village.” However, I never heard the term used in day-to-day conversation among villagers because it implies sexuality. Instead, in daily conversation people used expressions such as *at zot* (play for fun), *lof vud* (take a rest), *god* (get together) and *niangt* (sit down). *Iut fub* is an indispensable part of Hmub social life.<sup>9</sup> It entails special temporal and spatial arrangements and a special classification system for identifying individuals. *Iut fub* can take place on any night, since elders and children go to bed very early and the village becomes very dark and quiet. At some point one hears loud whistles (*kot ghait*) followed by footsteps and talking in low voices. These are the sounds of the boys (*dat vangt*) setting off to court girls, with boys from the Tang family (*zix Tangf*) going to the Zhang family (*zix Zhangb*) household and vice versa. When the footsteps stop, one hears the sound of a boy knocking on a girl's window as an invitation to talk. Depending on the status of their courtship, the conversations may be quiet and gentle; if several boys visit one girl, the conversation can grow loud and be punctuated by laughter. Groups of courting boys search for corresponding groups of girls—which isn't very difficult, since the girls talk and laugh loudly in the wooden houses where they gather. Around midnight, these groups break up and conversations become one-to-one, a situation called *ib laik del ib laik* (one likes the other). Such conversations may continue deep into the night, with the only true deadline for stopping being cock's crow at daybreak. Additionally, intimate body contact is quite common in Hmub flirting culture. A partner is permitted to put his hands on his girl's

8 Married *Hmub* mothers usually wear traditional clothes; most young unmarried women or married women without children wear pants and coats bought from “the outside”—e.g., summer blouses or sportswear and winter woolen sweaters.

9 In Han characters, *you fang* 遊方 or *yao ma lang* 搖馬郎 refer to courtship activities among the Eastern Miao in Guizhou, and *tiao yue* 跳月 or *tiao hua chang* 跳花場 refer to courtship activities among the Qing Miao or Hua Miao in central and western Guizhou and eastern Yunnan.

shoulders, waist or legs. Flirtatious or intimate physical contact between men and women is acceptable at the appropriate time and place for *iut fub*. The old people will scold the young if they disobey the rules. Moreover, only when girls and boys are together in a group can an individual openly engage in flirtatious intimate physical contact. In other words, if there is one boy flirting with a group of girls, they can only sit around the hearth and talk; but if there are two or three boys flirting with five or six girls, the boys can flirt with the girls next to them. If physical contact goes beyond the accepted norms, however, the other participants will intervene. Such inappropriate behavior indicates that the boys look down on the other girls present.

## An Experience of Listening in the Field

As I noted in an earlier excerpt from my field notes, sound is related to calling ghosts. Sound is also a central index pointing to occurrences of courtship. In fifteen notebooks I wrote voluminously on what I had *heard* about Hmub courtship activities. Those notebooks contain evidence of my learning to recognize the importance of knocking on a window late at night. The following entry was written in January 1999, during the early stages of my fieldwork.

I hurriedly returned to my fieldwork today, knowing that there will be a “building of a new house” and ghost-calling ritual tomorrow. By the time I finished discussing expenses with Ghaif’s father, it was 9:30. In order to get up early (the calling was to begin after second cock’s crow), and feeling tired anyway, I went to sleep early. Both Ghaif and I fell asleep quickly... I was awakened by knocking sounds. I thought it was dawn, but discovered it was only about eleven o’clock after looking at my watch. The knocking came at different tempos and had different beats. (It occurs to me that if I have the chance, I should record these.) I was awake by that time, but wanted to sleep. The knocking sounds continued. Ghaif woke up as well and said to the boys outside, “*Nat youl. Det dak youl!*” (I hear you, but I do not want to come [to the window]). She said these sentences two or three times, sounding a little bit angry. Later she told me that it was because they knocked too loudly. The knocking sounds did not stop immediately, but ceased after a while. We gradually fell asleep.

This excerpt conveys my initial feelings about and experience of the late-night knocking. These sounds usually woke me up unexpectedly; sometimes the knocking was so loud that it frightened me, and sometimes it occurred too many times in the same eve-

ning. It was a long time before I stopped feeling ambivalent about the knocking, which struck me as impolite since the noise interrupted my sleep. At the same time, my very reason for living in this village was *to study Hmub courtship*, and I came to recognize that these unwelcome signals were a part of my subject, and that they carried cultural and symbolic significance.

Every time a girl hears knocking, she recognizes the knocker by the tempo, speed or volume of the rapping. To an outsider like me, such knocking all sounded similar, but to the girls of the village it conveyed subtle or minor variations. Special knocking strategies can be identified. For example, using a special pattern, such as knocking the first three times softly at normal speed, then a pause, and knocking three times again, much louder or quicker, etc., may be arranged by the girl and boy who are courting each other regularly. Girls especially look forward to the knocking of their sweethearts (*ghat mal ghob*), but sweethearts are not the only knockers. In fact, knocking is mostly done by affines. Thus, what girls usually do is to differentiate between the knocking of a common affine of the same village and that of a stranger from the outside.

I began to categorize non-verbal sounds by linking them with specific personal relations—boyfriends, affinal cousins, friends, and strangers. At first, the rhythm and frequency of the knocking all seemed alike, and I assumed that it was all by the same boy who was interested in Ghaif. I later understood that the sounds were in fact made by several different courting boys.

I started to pay much closer attention to these late-night events. Almost every morning I would talk with Ghaif about the previous night's visitors and write about our discussions in as much detail as possible before planning my schedule for the day. Most of my questions concerned the identities of the visitors, their consanguineal or affinal relations, and the content of their conversations. The knocking eventually became an index for understanding late-night courting practices, and I learned that where I had perceived no differences between knocks, local village girls recognized a diverse range. This gave me an important opportunity to *feel* institutional courtship through listening as opposed to seeing or gaining knowledge from the explanations of informants. Ultimately, and with Ghaif's help, I was able to not only establish a musical and social view of late-night knocking, but also to complement it with values associated with interpreting what I was hearing. For example, I learned from Ghaif that if more than a couple of nights passed without someone knocking on her window, she experienced feelings of loneliness and sadness. She therefore generally looked forward to the late-night knocking, even though she never knew who the visitor would be on any given evening.

While I never analyzed the knocking in terms of pattern, frequency, volume, etc., hearing the sound assumed a position of value in my fieldwork. Experiencing the knock-

ing first-hand created a link between emotions and knowledge of Hmub courtship. For Hmub girls, the sound of knocking is a clear indication of courtship. Parents and other family members usually ignore the sound (or pretend to), regardless of its volume, frequency, or timing. However, girls feel a need to respond and must deal with the emotions tied to it. Most girls feel excitement when they hear knocking. In its absence, they may recite “*Sent feb lel, bib lok yaf*” (So quiet and cold like winter, how lonely we old ladies are), revealing a sense of desolation and perhaps concern that they will not find partners. This sensitivity explains the facility of Hmub girls to recognize their visitors by their knocks. Girls feel emotionally safe and confident about opening their windows at the familiar knocking of an affine, but may feel uncertain or even frightened at an unfamiliar sound and therefore refrain from opening their windows.

It was not the specific content or patterns of late-night knocking that produced meaning for me, but the aural experience that created links among various kinds of emotions. The transformation in my personal emotions from culture shock, fear, and strangeness to a familiar and regular daily experience was dramatic. Toward the end of my fieldwork, it wasn't unusual for me to not notice these late-night sounds and to sleep through even vigorous knocking. I learned that the sound was for the most part considered friendly and a practical symbol relevant to a collective core value of the village: maintaining its kinship system. This transformation of my emotions made it possible to understand and sympathize with the emotional world of the village girls, and to recognize how the experience of being awoken in the middle of the night enriched their lives. By focusing on auditory cues, I was able to rethink the relevance of such events to my understanding of Hmub courtship culture. I also was able to consider my own subjective experiences of hearing and feeling the emotions of Hmub girls during courtship, as well as my growth from an ethnographer experiencing culture shock to one feeling at ease in my fieldwork.

## Being an Apprentice Fieldworker Once Again

I was not a complete novice in fieldwork when I started my Hmub research, but the need to hone a new skill—listening—to collect ethnographic data resurrected feelings of unease and uncertainty I had felt during my first project in Taiwan. I lost some of my confidence and the ability to feel at home as a trained fieldworker. Outside the standards of observation I was familiar with, the need to understand the meaning of unrecognized sounds and voices in the context of Hmub courtship created a level of anxiety and uncertainty that threatened my identity. Culture shock clearly played a role in generating these

feelings, but more importantly for this discussion was the immediacy and the impact of hearing verbal and nonverbal sounds without confirming or supporting visual information about my perceptions of self and my sense of place. The following quote from Bull and Back (2003: 7) underscores the difference I felt between knowing the world and self through seeing and through hearing:

In vision, subject and object “appear” as transparent. Implied in the objectification of the world through sight is the control of that world. Yet if, as Bishop Berkeley notes, “Sounds are close to us as our thoughts,” then by listening we may be able to perceive the relationship between subject and object.

In other words, if I (as subject) merely perceived the phenomenon of Hmub courtship (the object) through visual observation, then relations among the data, methods, and my identity as a fieldworker became transparent, thus removing any space for rethinking the process and fully experiencing my Hmub courtship fieldwork. However, my hearing previously unrecognized late-night knocking sounds and courtship conversations in the absence of familiar standards of observation created anxiety and uncertainty while simultaneously providing an immediate channel for *feeling* where I was, who I was, and what I was encountering in the village.

## Cultivating My Ear

Even though I convinced myself to depend on hearing as an additional data collection method, the contents of my field notes still reflect uncertainty in my ability to make full use of auditory sources of information. Part of the reason was my belief that “seeing is believing,” which echoes Erlmann’s (2004: 20) observation in *Hearing Cultures*: “Audio-centered forms of social practice cannot in themselves be construed as alternatives to relations of power thought to be anchored in vision, surveillance, and mass-mediated forms of visual production and consumption.”<sup>10</sup> Still, I had to write down my observations to achieve the goals of preserving and intellectually integrating what I had experienced. In addition to recognizing the semantic messages produced by writing, it was by exploring the material level of writing in the field that I learned how writing also helped

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10 I am grateful to one anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Maurice Bloch’s recent work, “Truth and Sight: Generalizing without Universalizing” (Bloch 2008).

me make sense of what I had heard. As ethnographers we are trained to record data and write them down as notes. During my Hmub courtship project I did not use a tape recorder to capture the late-night knocking, in large part because the voices and conversations were frequently subdued, and (except for the knocks on Ghaif's window) advanced recording techniques would have been required to record knocking at other houses. Another problem was ethical: courtship activity, especially at night, is more private and personal than almost all other public activities in Hmub society. Using a tape recorder (or camera) would have introduced a degree of intrusion and threat into the private zone of nighttime courtship activity. I therefore reverted to recording what I heard with pen and paper.

Most ethnographers recognize the need to write extensively in the field, and believe that their work benefits from meanings and information that is written down and submitted to later analysis. However, the act of writing—that is, the writing process and its materiality—has not been scrutinized to the same degree as the process of collecting data and recording it. As my experience in Guizhou shows, writing in the field is multi-functional—in other words, it is also associated with bodily experiences. Christina Haas (1996: 24) is one of the few scholars to specifically comment on the materiality of writing from the aspect of its technology and transformation—“from the heft of the manuscript and the feel of a new Blackfoot pencil, to the bright, wired-up, whirring box and clicking keyboard on the desk.” Haas has also found that there is a sense problem with text for writers making the transition from pen-and-paper to computer. For example, “I have to print it to get *a perspective* on it,” or “I don't have the *intimacy* I need with my text on the computer” (ibid.: 120, original emphasis). The text senses are described as spatial, living, or moving objects (ibid.).

I believe there are two types of writing materiality: technological and time consumption, and both create certain resonances in my body. Haas (1966: 24) notes that “writing is made material through the use of technologies, and writing is technological in the sense and to the extent that it is material.” During my Hmub fieldwork, writing was very material in the technological sense: I used my old Mont Blanc pen to write down everything I observed and heard in hardcover notebooks, page by page, volume by volume. Since there was no bookstore in the village, I tried my best to conserve paper by writing field notes in small versions of Chinese characters and English letters, and made attempts to romanize my transcriptions of oral Hmub speech. Second, although I had a laptop computer, electricity was intermittent and I mostly wrote my field notes or diary entries in a labor-intensive and time-consuming manner with pen and paper. Sitting and writing for long periods of time usually brought some physical discomfort, but once a regular routine was established, my writing—like meditation or exercise—helped me to

deal with my emotions of anxiety, uncertainty, and/or confusion that came from being in another culture. I felt safe in the visible accumulation of notes. The repetitive act of writing contributed a great deal to my practice in focusing on sounds and voices and the social meanings they have for the Hmub.

Verbal and non-verbal sounds may be perceived, encoded, and decoded by different cognitive processes, but both convey social meaning and emotions among Hmub youth. I therefore consider them sound/voice units similar to the Chinese concept of *shengyin* 聲音 (voice and sound) for descriptive and analytical purposes. It was important to record aural tones and to transform them into words and sentences—concrete data for safe storage in my notebooks.

The literary theorist Walter Ong's idea on the movement from orality to literacy provides a basis for extending our understanding of the relationship between ear work and hand work. According to Ong, writing is "the most monumentous of all human technological inventions" (Ong 1982: 72), translating sound into space and "transform[ing] the human life world" (ibid.: 85). In other words, Ong believes the interdependence between hearing and writing is exposed as a return to the superiority of the visual sense. More or less parallel to Ong's theory, ethnographic training entails a hierarchy of bodily experiences and resonances. Sight is usually at the top of that hierarchy, while hearing holds a much lower position.

In this paper I have tried to express how transposing heard experiences and felt resonances into writing allowed me to use multiple senses to understand how the Hmub invent and perceive their courtship culture. Two additional layers of experience can be pursued further. First, parallel to Foucault's technology of self, I experienced the cultivation of self via the specific technique of writing. In addition to feeling safe in the visible accumulation of my field notes, I trained and grew through my regular and extensive writing practice. This bodily cultivation experience became evident in the transformation of my emotional world of self and identity as I increasingly internalized my field experience as an ethnographer. This process is partly in line with Vygotsky's notion of "mediational means," the theory that writing's transformative efficacy is both material and symbolic at the same time (Hass 1996: 225).<sup>11</sup>

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11 Influenced by the Marxist principles and Engle's historical materialism, "(Russian theorist Levy) Vygotsky's theory of mediation helps us to see tools, signs, and technologies as spatially and culturally distributed systems that function to augment human psychological processing" (Hass 1996: 17). According to Hass, "Viewed in this way, then, technologies—in particular, literacy technologies—are themselves complex systems that might fruitfully be studied genetically, in the Vygotskian sense" (ibid.).



The second layer concerns verification of the meanings of non-verbal sounds. Like Stoller's (1987, 1989) insights, my point is that learning how to hear, understand, and interpret non-verbal sound is an important skill that has been neglected in our field. Stoller is one of several anthropologists who have demonstrated that recognition of the force of auditory cultures is largely absent in Western traditions, and perhaps the sound of knocking in a Hmub village is not sufficiently exotic an example. Still, those night-time sounds might carry different meanings in my own culture, so I had to learn anew and consciously practice listening skills crucial to carry out the research. The experience of hearing linked various emotions (e.g., disclosing the emotions of Hmub girls being courted), while the act of writing allowed me to reflect on and make sense of the knocking and its associated conversations, events, and participants. Through writing I was able to attach social and emotive value to the sounds I heard and to understand the social and emotional lives of Hmub youth.

## Concluding Remarks

The processes of emergence and transformation of self identity and the bodily experiences of ethnographers in the field are rarely noted beyond textbook references to culture shock and its accompanying symptoms of loneliness, homesickness, and depression. Its symptoms may have far-reaching implications regarding the quality of data and its value within the larger social settings perceived by ethnographers. How I cultivated my ear through the practice of listening and writing and how I navigated the transformation of senses, emotions, identity, and professional self during my fieldwork bring into sharper focus how the bodily experiences may combine to make the ethnographer a keener perceiver of events. Those experiences all contributed to my transformation as an ethnographer and a self, as well as my knowledge of Hmub courtship, a phenomenon that complements Foucault's (1988: 18) ideas about the technologies of self:

...which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

Listening carefully allowed me to also experience my knowledge of Hmub courtship. The late-night knocking on windows, an "audio-centered form of social practice" (Erlmann 2004: 20), revealed to me the institutional, formal, and collective features of

Hmub courtship by its “sense of aural immediacy” (ibid.), which led me to then categorize the sounds I heard. In analysis elsewhere (Chien 2009) the long-term and short-term effects of premarital and extra-marital flirtation, I interpreted Hmub courtship as an emotional zone of great value to young villagers. Here I emphasize how that courtship can be better understood by adding data gathered by careful listening. But as Erlmann (2004: 18) observes, this raises the question of what kind of ears are needed to gather and sift through the sounds of everyday life, to “pick up all these sounds adrift, these echoes, reverberations, hums, and murmurs outside or in between the carefully bounded precincts of orderly verbal communication and music”? This aspect of ethnographic methodology deserves further attention so it may be better integrated into our repertoire of skills for understanding the communities we study.

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# 田野裡的聽

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在人類學的學科史，民族誌田野有其核心的位置。筆者在這篇文章指出，民族誌田野工作不僅積極產出人類學知識，並也涉及身體經驗、個人情緒、人類學者之專業自我與認同的修練。本文討論筆者在貴州東部大山裡的一個苗族(Hmub)村寨，以民族誌學徒之身，進行遊方的田野。以此闡述田野的聽與寫作為一種身體修練，既是關乎個人學習與瞭解的一種人類經驗，亦是特定文化脈絡下的社會建構。經由描述我個人在民族誌田野裡的學徒經驗，探索「我聽」與「我寫」兩者之間的關聯，以及它們如何影響並轉變我對一特定苗族文化以及我自身的內在瞭解。其意義與細節之所在，不僅來自深夜敲窗聲的內容與音韻風格，更是「聽」的經驗本身。後者串起好幾層不同個人情緒，並轉變它們。此情緒經驗的變化過程，也涉及了筆者對於自己作為民族誌田野工作者的認同。深夜敲窗聲的聽與對聽的訓練，使文化挫折、衝擊與害怕、無所適從的感受，到熟悉的情緒轉變，得以呈顯，並也因此才感同身受地進入苗族未當家姑娘內在的情緒與情感世界。

關鍵詞：感官，身體修練，學徒，田野，苗族（Hmub）

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