

TAPE INDEX

Interviewee: Jousa Bee Xiong
4709 White Avenue
Eau Claire, WI 54703
715/836-9629(h)
833-1977(w)

Recorder: SONY DAT TCD-D3
Tape: Fujitsu DAT R-120
Microphones: mono lapel mic
for interview and some music,
stereo mic for geej playing

Interviewer: James P. Leary
Date: December 15, 1992
Place: Chippewa Valley Museum Library

Circumstances of Recording:

Mr. Xiong had houseguests, so conducting an interview at his home would have been an imposition. The interview site was the Chippewa Valley Museum's library, chosen because it was fitted out with tables and chairs, was relatively quiet with acceptable acoustics, and had enough space for Xiong to maneuver while playing the geej. Besides the interviewer, Tim Pfaff of the Chippewa Valley Museum staff was present, as was Metin Ekici, a Turkish graduate student in folklore at the University of Wisconsin. Pfaff and Ekici each raised pertinent questions in the course of the interview and they are noted in the tape index.

The interview session extended from shortly after 5 PM until 7:50 PM. Mr. Xiong arrived from work with four flutes, a jaw harp, and two gees. He had to leave prior to 8 because of his houseguests. Accordingly the interview was not as thorough as it might be, but it does manage an overview of Xiong's musical repertoire, with particular attention to the importance of the geej in funerals. Jousa Bee Xiong speaks excellent English and was both articulate and accomodating throughout. Toward the end of the two hour tape recorded interview, Xiong sang songs and played them on various instruments. Because he played the flutes and jaw harp while sitting at a table, I kept the monophonic lapel microphone on Xiong, but for the geej-playing, I used a stereo microphone and a boom.

NOTE:

1) I have kept the DAT (digital) tape on which this interview was originally recorded and have provided the CVM with a dub of the interview on two cassette tapes. My reasons for keeping the DAT tape are: a) the CVM does not have equipment to play it, and b) I would like to use it for a Down Home Dairyland program on Wisconsin Public Radio to promote the Hmong exhibit in fall 1993. Should the CVM wish to use the original DAT tape in order to make a "soundtrack" for the exhibit, I will be happy to provide it.

2) I did not stop Mr. Xiong to get spellings for Hmong or Laotian words. In some cases I was able to find spellings. Others are indicated with empty brackets. Perhaps a translator could fill in the information. The songs might also be rendered in Hmong and in English translations.

<u>Time</u>	<u>Content</u>
0:00:00-0:00:27	Announcement.
0:00:28-0:01:04	B. in Laos in a village [] in the province of <u>Xiang Khouang</u> . B. ca. 1961, not certain.
0:01:04-0:08:40	Father was a soldier, had eight brothers and a sister. After Vietnam War American CIA withdrew from Laos, Communist Pathet Lao took over in Laos. Made life difficult for the Hmong. Xiong's family went to hide in the

forest after 1975 end of Vietnam War. Carried guns, grenades, ammunition, hid in tunnels and caves until 1978. Ran out of arms. Had totally lost their village. Were in the high mountains of Laos, the [] area. April 1978 walked to Thailand with other families, about 3,000 people fighting and walking. Took about 2 1/2 months to get to the Mekong River. Had to fight at the river several times and to get around an electric fence. Family split up. Joua sneaked across the border to the river, told family he would try to return with a boat. Once across regulations prevented Xiong from going back. After a few weeks was able to return. Hmong on the Laotian side were starving. Some had gone back to the mountains, some had surrendered. Xiong could not find his parents, walked nearly half way back to the mountains trying to find them. Had no luck and returned to Thailand. Three weeks later his parents and brother found boats and were able to cross. (Joua Bee himself had crossed by floating and swimming with a bamboo pipe.) The Mekong River about a mile and a half wide. Water buffaloes looked smaller than chickens on the other side.

0:08:41-0:15:25

Once in the camps only stayed about six months, then came to Philadelphia with a brother and uncle. Parents came shortly afterward. Were in an urban black area, only knew a few words of English. Black folks not very friendly, thought Xiong was Chinese and could do kung fu. Got in several fights, one time almost to the death. Scary. Then Xiong's parents settled in Chicago so he went there. Situation not much better. Got in touch with Kai Moua in Eau Claire. Were encouraged to come to a place that was a small town and offered good educational opportunities. Arrived in Eau Claire in August 1980. Had come to Philadelphia in July 1979. Went to Memorial High School. Very difficult at first, knew math but no English. Past experience as a soldier and a farmer gave him no skills to get by in the USA. After high school, studied computer languages at Chippewa Valley Technical School. After graduating, worked six months for the Hmong Mutual Aid Association (HMAA), then decided on more education. Got a criminal justice degree and joined Eau Claire police reserve for four years. Currently working with Eau Claire County Human Services' Employment and Training Program. Initially worked with SE Asian refugee peoples, after one year switched to doing the same work with the Euro-American population. Has been at that task for four years now. Case load almost 200 people. Trying to help people back to school, to find child care, to find jobs. Most of his case load consists of divorced women. Joua Bee is the first person to work for his family. Arrived in the USA single, but now has a wife and seven children. Bought a home for himself and has several duplexes for rent. Is proud of his accomplishments.

0:15:26-0:20:30

Regarding music: After 1975 Vietnam War was over. Spent a few years working on the farm in his mountain village. No school was possible. Began to learn music from his relatives in the village at age 13 or 14. Worked hard at night, worked in the fields in the day. Occasionally had to go and fight to protect the village. Two years are not enough to learn Hmong music, but Xiong learned quite a bit during the six months he spent in the camps, especially by helping elders at funerals. When Xiong came to this country and married, wife's parents were Christians who had rejected

much of their traditional culture. Eventually realized the importance of keeping his Hmong culture. The geej is an important symbol of the Hmong people, no other people, says Xiong, have such an instrument. In this country the elders support Xiong's playing at New Year's and at the funerals. They say he is the best player in this country. Did not play much at funerals in the early years in the USA, but did a lot of presentations to people who were interested in learning about Hmong culture and music. Sometimes got paid, sometimes didn't. Put a lot of his time into this because he felt it was important to convey a sense of the Hmong to the larger populace.

0:20:31-0:27:56

Regarding his early training in music in the village: Cousin bought Xiong a geej, told him it was important to learn the instrument. No school was possible, war had subsided, there was time to learn. Learned to play at night and sometimes in the day from elders who had no formal schooling but were steeped in Hmong oral tradition. Xiong worked for these elders in exchange for their teachings. Learning the geej was the most difficult learning experience Xiong had. The master played and Xiong listened, then he played and the master listened and watched his fingers. After two years Xiong just learned enough to help at funerals, but was not yet a master. Funerals of important persons required 2-3 weeks of constant playing and drumming. Younger players were needed to help the masters. Xiong's masters still live in Laos. He has been able to go back to visit them. Xiong has now surpassed his masters in skill because they have had fewer occasions to play. His masters are very proud of him. One is Kao Neng Xiong [sp. of full name?], the other is Kao Yia Xiong [sp. of full name?]. Back in 1986 one of Xiong's masters won a competition in Laos as the best geej player. Xiong's masters now live in the city because the communists want to keep track of the Hmong and prevent them from being in contact with Hmong soldiers in the forest. In 1985 Xiong had won a parallel competition in Minneapolis/St. Paul. Xiong has traveled recently to China where he has met geej players. He believes he is currently one of the best players in the world.

0:27:57-0:34:08

The oldest brother of Xiong's master knew how to make the geej. It is made of small bamboo called []. Has to dry the bamboo 8-12 months. Uses hard wood for the sound cavity, cuts it into a rounded shape with a knife, then sands with a coarse leaf in lieu of sandpaper, then splits the round wooden piece in half and hollows it out and pierces it so that bamboo pieces have to be passed through the sound cavity. The piercings have to be measured carefully so that the bamboo passes through tightly. The sections of bamboo passing through the sound cavity are fitted with copper reeds that have been pounded many times. The halves of the sound cavity are held together with a bark twine, although tape is often used in the USA. In Laos beeswax was used to seal around the sound cavity if the maker had not fitted the bamboo snugly through the holes. The bamboo and reeds passing through the sound cavity are of varying dimensions to produce different tones, yet efforts are made to keep these dimensions standard from one geej to another so that various instruments will deliver the same sound. The finished instruments may be fitted out with

straps and decorative beads.

0:34:09-0:42:30

On funerals. When Xiong's masters were young, there were competitions at the funeral where one player challenged another to see who could follow the other's moves. No competitions in funerals in Xiong's experience. Cows and water buffaloes were killed at funerals, there was lots of meat. If a rival geej player won a funeral competition, they got the largest share of payment in meat. This custom created bad feelings and was discontinued some decades prior to Xiong's birth. Christianity among the Hmong also resulted in the rejection by converts of the old ways. In traditional customs, the dead person's body must be washed and dressed in new clothes, and placed in the living room. Then the geej player must perform a certain song to help guide the spirit back to its original home so that it can be reincarnated as a human being or something else. The trip back is made step-by-step as the geej player sings the spirit back through time to all the places where the spirit has lived. Eventually the spirit is taken back to the child's house where its "baby shirt" or placenta is found. The spirit needs this to return to the spirit world. [In Hmong culture the boy's placenta is buried near the center post of the house, the girl's is buried under the bed.] Guidance back is intended to allow the spirit to become a human being again instead of an animal that will be eaten or a stone that is mute. The song that guides the spirit back takes 3-5 hours to perform. It is very important and is followed by a second requisite song that also guides the spirit back. After those two songs are performed the geej player can play an array of songs that are "fun," "happy," "sad." There are also "foster" songs for people without parents, widow songs, songs for various meals. The dead person's spirits are invited to eat with those gathered. Then there are several important songs at the end when the body is moved outside. After all the singing the family can bury the body. After a year the spirit is invited back again by the geej player and the drummer. This is the last time that the spirit and the family can enjoy one another. Many of the same funeral songs are repeated over a one to three day period.

0:42:31-0:47:15

Hmong songs are delivered through the music. The playing of geej is not music but words. Xiong had to memorize all of these words and then coordinate his memory of the words with his breathing and fingering to make the instrument speak. Although the basic structures of funeral songs are the same, different geej players may express them with individual variation. The young player helping out a master must be aware of the basic songs and the variations in order to help out competently at funerals. Non-playing elders form a critical audience at funerals, poor players lose face. Elders and master players sit around while the younger players are playing. They appear to be sleeping but are listening. They do not criticize directly but make comments to others. Very occasionally a young player will get a direct compliment. At the funeral typically the master performs the important songs, then younger players help out.

0:47:16-0:49:15

While the playing is going on during protracted funerals, many goings-on. Some relatives prepare food for many

visitors. Some play cards and tell stories to make the house warm, to make some fun and some noise so the family isn't continually despairing. But the geej and the drum are constant. Some geej players are also shamans. Once the person is dead, there is little for the shaman to do.

0:49:16-0:53:05 Regarding the steps done by the geej player during funerals: [Joua Bee misunderstands me here. By "steps," I meant the dance steps executed by the geej player, but JBX interprets steps to mean the stages involved in the funeral. He goes over elements of the funeral mentioned previously before we clarify the misunderstanding.] Before people are put in the coffin a special song is sung [] suggesting that the person is about to ride a horse back to the spirit world. There are also songs when a cow or pig is killed. The spirit is told who has given the animal to them; each animal has a symbolic significance. The cow is associated with the umbrella that protects the spirit on its journey. The chicken will protect the spirit from being scared; the chicken knows whether or not the spirit is being received by other spirits that are actually their relatives or whether they are bad spirits bent upon deception. [I clarify my interest in learning about the geej player's footwork.]

0:53:06-0:56:50 All the people in the village come to see the funerals during a particular day. There is a special name for this day: []. The villagers bring food and money and come with another geej player. The player inside at the funeral has to come outside and welcome the people and the other player and invite the latter inside to play. The players dance and play while this is going on. Many years ago when the outside player came there was a competition between the outside and the inside player over payment for the funeral. Nowadays the outside player plays a few songs and then sets his instrument aside. Dance steps and special moves remain cultivated by contemporary geej players, however, for dance competitions.

0:56:51-0:58:55 The same songs and basic sequences are observed for funerals. But additional songs can be added, so the lengths of funerals vary depending upon the age, wealth, number of relatives, and so on of the deceased.

0:58:56-1:01:45 There are dangers to both the deceased spirit and to the geej player during the funeral. The player is careful to conceal his identity from the bad spirits. Otherwise they can follow him and make him sicken and die. The player tells the spirit false descriptions of himself to tell to the bad spirits: "His eye is so big and his ear is an elephant's ear []. He came today, but he went back yesterday. He came on the air, but he went back under the ground." These statements confuse the bad spirits. The dead person is also given a crossbow, a gun, and a guiding chicken to ward off the bad spirits.

1:01:46-1:08:25 On changes in funerals in America. If people are Christians, they do exactly what other American Christians do: they have a short service, the body is buried, and people go home.. JBX does not think this is as valuable as the old Hmong way. In the old tradition, if someone brought money and food, there was a bond or an obligation.

Christians feel they have no obligations except to God. They do not observe the traditional reciprocity. Christians do not stay as long at the funerals either. When JBX plays traditional funerals in Eau Claire, he plays 2-3 days for 24 hours a day. Bodies must be separated during funerals so spirits are not confused. Here in Eau Claire arrangements are made with the funeral directors so that no other body is in the building during the ceremonies. Often the Hmong have to pay extra for this. Because the spirits have to travel further from America, the notion of the coffin as a "horse" is replaced by the notion of the coffin as an "airplane." People who die must be guided back to the old country. Bodies are also fitted out with special shoes that keep them warm in cold weather and ward off insects.

- 1:08:26-1:14:35 Many years ago geej players performed at marriages, but JBX's masters didn't know these songs, although they had heard of them. Other occasions for playing the geej include festivals, but funeral songs are never performed apart from funerals. If you play the song for someone who is alive, that person may sicken and die. There are some songs that are for fun and there is a New Year's song to send the old year away and welcome the new year. There are also competitions for geej players (in Minneapolis, for example). There are 10-15 judges who know how the instrument is played. Songs are not played, the sounds made by the geej have no linguistic meaning: it is just music to accompany the player's dances. The player-dancer executes difficult steps, leaps, and tumbles. In America geej players like JBX are often asked to present Hmong culture to outsiders. On these occasions, he explains the significance of the instrument and plays/dances to demonstrate.
- 1:14:36-1:15:52 When first learning the instrument and the dances, JBX practiced rolling over and moving without any instrument. He was given a piece of wood to simulate the geej. The real instrument was expensive (one or two silver bars in Laos--a wife costs only four silver bars) and a young player did not wish to risk damaging his geej while practicing dances. Repair was expensive as well and makers were hard to find. JBX broke his instrument once and had to walk two days to where someone was who could fix it. Never broke one again.
- 1:15:53-1:16:59 JBX can think of nothing else in particular to say about the geej. [Tim asks if the instrument was always going in the refugee camps and JBX answers that it was.]
- 1:17:00-1:22:40 At age 13-15 in the village JBX began to play instruments other than the geej. These were "for fun, for dating." Even if you are not very handsome, you can do well by playing well. The other instruments were also used for protection. If he traveled from one village to the next he played the instrument to let people know he was not a soldier or a dangerous animal. The flute was especially useful for courting girlfriends and expressing feelings of love and affection. JBX courted his wife with singing. When he sang a very good love song at her house, she fell in love with him. This is in America. In Laos he would have been outside the house. JBX's song was: If I get you I will take care of you; if there is heavy work I will do it; I will love you for ever.

- X 1:22:41-1:26:08 JBX introduces a song he used to court his wife. It concerns a boy who is studying in school while his girlfriend waits for him. Then he sings the song.
- 1:26:09-1:27:18 JBX sings this song in a particular Hmong dialect, but he can sing in other dialects as well. He can also play this song on the flute. He sings, then plays a brief snatch of another song on the flute.
- 1:27:19-1:29:00 JBX has gotten out his flutes. He doesn't know how to make the flutes. Each flute is different. One is a [], a flute that is cut in a certain way. Another is a [raj pum liv??] where you can cover the opening where the air comes in (i.e. a fipple flute). According to Hmong tradition, this is a safer flute. In Laos there are many spirits in the mountains. They are attracted by the flute and can enter through the opening, come into the mouth of the player and make him sick.
- 1:29:01-1:29:30 JBX plays the flute he has just described.
- 1:29:31-1:30:00 Tries another song but cannot quite get it on the flute.
- 1:30:01-1:30:32 Explains the first song played on the flute: To be a human being is very difficult without your parents. When your parents leave the world you have no others who will love you as much as your parents.
- 1:30:33-1:32:48 Another song for a girlfriend. How come you were born so pretty? What kind of food did your parents eat that you were born so pretty? I'm short and not so handsome, but I like you very much. My parents say that if you become their daughter-in-law they will love you forever. Ask your parents to let us marry. [1:31:30] Tries to play the song on the flute, but has to switch flutes before succeeding.

X 1:32:49-1:35:30

Some flutes have a better tonal range than others. JBX picks up another flute and introduces a song, "pretty much from this country": when I go to school, there is nobody to support me, I have to struggle by myself and suffer; when school is through, I have to pay off debts. [1:33:41] Plays the song on the flute.

(2) 1:33 - 1:35:23
This I play a song...

1:35:31-1:38:39

Takes up another flute which has a copper reed. The prior flutes had no reed, but the tan nplain is a single free reed instrument with finger holes to produce different pitches. JBX plays it when he feels stress or loneliness. He speaks his feelings through the instrument and after playing it feels much better--better than if he had gone to a counselor. [1:36:45] Plays song. [1:38:09] This instrument has more of a buzzing sound and requires more breath to play. Some of these flutes can very long, but JBX prefers a shorter one that is easier to carry.

(3) * One of the reasons I play it...

X 1:38:40-1:43:53

Takes up the jaw harp or ncas. The instrument can be carried easily in a pocket. It comes in a small case and, some say, has the capacity to be used as a weapon. The small strip of metal, housed in a case, can be flicked out to strike someone in the eye. But this has not happened, to JBX's knowledge, for many generations. The instrument is used to play at night to a girlfriend. The instrument is not loud, so it must be played at a quiet time. You play

(1) 1:39:53 - 1:40:56
"Normally this piece is played at night... that's good, I like that."

(0.5) 1:42:36 - 1:43:45
2:02 breath + flute

love songs on the instrument and you can express things on the instruments that you could not say in ordinary language. One of JBX's instrument's has a long string. If he wasn't that taken with the girl, he would hand her the instrument to play back to him, but would be able to retrieve it by means of the long string. Plays the ncas that comes from China. [1:42:40]

1:43:54-1:47:54 Then takes up the ncas from Laos, which is a little louder and lower than the one from China. Explains the prior song: Dear lover, how can you be so beautiful? If you don't mind, can you be my lover forever? Then reckons his next song will say: I am not so handsome and am very poor, but will you marry a poor person who really loves you? How will you feel if we get married and only have water to drink in the house? [1:45:20] Plays the song on the ncas from Laos.

1:47:55-1:49:08 There are lots of other Hmong instruments, but these are all that JBX can show today. One of his daughters plays the violin, another plays the "American" flute. They don't play the Hmong flute. But Joua is teaching two of his young boys to play the geej and to dance.

1:49:09-1:50:44 Joua's brothers play in a Hmong rock band. They would like to do a concert in collaboration with JBX sometime. The brothers don't know anything about Hmong music. They have learned to play by ear. They have been playing since about 1984. They play traditional love songs, sad songs, and pedagogical songs.

[At this point I switch to a stereo microphone to record the geej.]

X 1:50:45-1:55:26 JBX explains a mythological song. At the beginning of the world there were nine suns and moons, but someone killed eight of them. The remaining sun and moon very scared to come out. The rooster is the only animal who knows when the sun will come out, and so he crows to encourage the sun to come out. No other animal has this power. In an early era the chicken had no corn, but the sun gave the chicken corn. JBX sings the song. [1:52:30] JBX plays the song on the geej. [1:53:55]

1:55:27-2:02:20 JBX introduces another traditional song about studying and going to school. Sings the song. [1:56:10] Plays the song on the geej. [1:59:35]

[The tape runs out as the session ends.]