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Visualized Trauma, Sensitized Resistance: Urban Art among the French Hmong Community

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Abstract

Various types of urban art emerged and prospered in recent decades when degenerating cities were embracing art as a marketing strategy. This urban-rejuvenation approach sheds less light on the agency and motivation of artists. This paper examines how ethnic artists represent traumatic memory, reflect nostalgia, and mobilize individuals to collaborate with one another to build resilience. This study contributes to the literature that explores the agency and creativity of underrepresented ethnic minority artists in a global society at large.

Keywords

Urban Art; Graffiti; Trauma; Refugees; Hmong; France

Introduction

Over decades, young people around the world have embraced urban art to protest domination and express themselves, redefine the spatial territory of urban space, negotiate representations and practice citizenship (Ferrell 1996; Macdonald 2001; Fieni 2016; Baker 2015; Awad & Wagoner 2018). Since the 1980s, French youth have expressed their struggles through graffiti, rap music, and break dance. Their urban art practices have represented nostalgia, solidarity, and resilience in urban spaces (Bourderionnet 2011; Debras 2019; see Hammou's review 2020). In recent years, urban authorities have turned the accusation of 'vandalism' on urban art into 'cultural diversity' as one of the marketing strategies for cities. Bruce (2019) has revealed the republican imperatives for inclusion and capitalism's motive in organizing legal graffiti festivals in France. However, this marketing strategy ignores artists' motivation and agency in regard to managing identity-making, resisting societal oppression, and struggling against structural violence. Moreover, the available research is insufficient to provide a detailed picture of urban artists with ethnic backgrounds in contemporary France.

In this paper, I scrutinize how ethnic artists represent traumatic memory, reflect nostalgia, and mobilize individuals to collaborate with one another to build resistance. I mainly focus on three French Hmong artists and their creations, namely, oil paintings, sand performances, and graffiti – although several other artistic mediums are used by these artists. I use 'urban art'¹ to refer to artworks with non-traditional tools/skills delivered in an urban space. Some Hmong artists have trained in Fine Art colleges; others are self-trained artists. Their efforts and endeavors reveal the multiple facets of urban art as a means of identity-making and resistance-building in contemporary French society.

This paper focuses on three French Hmong artists and their artwork, analyzes the significance of their work and examines the audiences' comments. Their work was showcased in the '[Hmong de France Aujourd'hui](#)' community on Facebook². Artworks recommended by the Hmong community attracted me and I made contact with artists. I used a number of sources to collect data on their work and its reception in the Hmong community. For example, I conducted a semi-structured interview with Txeuying Vang during my fieldwork in France in April 2017. In addition, I collected comments and recommendations from my interlocutors about Hmong artists during my ethnographic fieldwork between 2016 and 2019. The COVID-19 situation prevented further fieldwork based in the community, so I conducted online semi-structured interviews with JinLee and other artists in December 2021. I also collected news reports, publications, magazine articles, posters, and business brochures. Considering their fame and businesses, I withhold the legal names of these French Hmong artists, referring to them by the names they use as artists and use anonymity in reporting comments from community members.

The main method used in this research consisted of the content analysis of artwork, interview transcripts, media coverage, and written documents. Content analysis is an appropriate methodological tool for "making valid references from data to their context" (Krippendorff 1989). Content analysis enables urban art researchers to interpret specified messages in visual representations within its societal context. In this paper, content analysis was carried out to examine the messages delivered by French Hmong artists within the French societal context.

This paper examines how Hmong artists share painful memories, empathize with audiences, and mobilize younger generations to build resistance. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section examines how French Hmong artists grew up in French society. The second section analyzes how their artworks

1 Previous studies use 'contemporary art', 'urban art', and 'street art' interchangeably (Perera, 2019). The term 'urban art' is more of an umbrella term for 'any art in the style of street art, style writing or mural art' (Blanché, 2015).

2 <https://www.facebook.com/HmongDeFranceAujourdhui/>

represent multiple themes, mobilize readers and passersby, and encourage resistance against social injustice and invisibility. The third section summarizes the main arguments of this paper.

Settling Down and Growing Up in France

In 1961-1975, the Laotian Hmong pledged their allegiance to different political elites and the CIA ([Yang 2003](#)). After the Vietnam War, the Laotian Hmong fled to Thailand to escape persecution. From 1975 to 1987, France received 115,693 refugees from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos ([Hassoun 1988](#)). The lack of data on the ethnic origin of French-born second- and third-generation migrants in France is due to the French Republic's regime that banned the ethnic registration of French citizens with a migration background (see [Simon 2015](#)). Social scientists have had approximate figures based on their own investigation and estimates, from 13,000 ([Vang 2018](#)) to 15,000 ([Lemoine, 2005](#); [Vang 2016](#)).

The French Hmong community is scattered across the country because of the resettlement and integration policies ([Gauthier 1996](#), p. 26). These newcomers received short-term vocational training and began working in factories. They have encountered various challenges – language barrier, education inefficiency, low employment and social immobility ([Hassoun 1988, 1997](#); [Marceaux, 1996](#)). Educational attainment and achievement among the 1.5 generation and second generation is not very high ([Yang 1995](#)), especially among the women. According to [Yang's study \(1995\)](#), and confirmed by my fieldwork, French Hmong women are less committed to pursuing advanced degrees than to entering endogamous marriages.

Over the past 40 years, the French Hmong community has suffered the dual violence of social immobility and invisibility due to low education achievement at the higher education level ([Yang 1995](#)) and, later, in professional domains. In France, refugees from Southeast Asia were absent in the political discourse of immigration in the 1990s ([Billion 2001](#)). Their trauma, sacrifice and sufferings have not been recognized openly, publicly and widely. They do not have access to directly address their pain and trauma in the current 'color-blind' society. Thus, members of the young generation of Laotian Hmong descendants seek alternative ways to express their frustration and anger ([Shi 2022](#)). Urban art enables Hmong youth to raise awareness in their visual voices, and call for resistance against structural violence.

The rich literature on Hmong folk or traditional art focuses mostly on textile art or *paj ntaub* ([Symonds 2004](#); [Craig 2010](#); [Shi 2020](#)), but previous research has paid little attention to other types of art, for instance, self-documentary ([Koltyk 1993](#)). This paper focuses on urban art among the French Hmong community.

The second generation of Hmong refugees in France has received primary and secondary education in local schools ([Yang 1995](#)). Some of them have been trained in art schools or professional colleges. For example, comic-animation artist Patricia Lyfoung has obtained her baccalaureate in literature. After that, she has obtained a degree in illustration and then trained in animation at the Gobelins School, combining formal art training with the inspiration from the Japanese cartoons of the 1980s³. Patricia's career path is an example of formal art education, but others are self-educated artists. For instance, sculpture artist Noël Ly has obtained a baccalaureate in Metal Structure and has worked in the metal industry for more than 15 years⁴. He owns his business 'Nocas Metal Art' and has obtained several awards. In general, Patricia and Noël's artworks are rooted in the context of art education and cultural consumption in France.

Three artists and their artwork will be examined in this paper. They grew up in France, witnessed the struggle of parents and the entire Hmong community, and finally motivated themselves to express opinions,

3 Patricia Lyfoung's bio profile at an art exhibition [June 19, 2021, Bibliothèque Saint-Corneille Compiègne, France].

4 Noël Ly's bio profile at an art exhibition [July 2-31, 2019, Lambesc, France].

feelings, and visions through art. Meanwhile, they have taken to new media – Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram – and promoted themselves to the global public.

JinLee has labeled himself as a ‘multidisciplinary artist’ who practices sand performance, light painting, singing, rap, and theater. JinLee claimed, ‘*I think that a single discipline cannot express all of my personality; that is why I made the choice to practice several artistic forms of expression*’⁵.

Tennch Tcha is a designer and graffiti artist. When he was a teenager, he enjoyed hip-hop culture and took a training course taught by a graffiti artist. Since then, Tennch has learnt more about graffiti and turned himself into a self-employed artist. He is also recognized as someone who has trained teenagers to express themselves through art⁶. Much of Tennch Tcha’s artwork is murals and large-scale decoration, but as a commercial artist, he also paints graffiti on cars, house walls, domestic spaces, and business spaces according to customer demands.

Txeuying Vang was born in Sayaboury, Laos and fled to Thailand with his parents in 1975 when he was three years old. His family moved to France in 1979. Txeuying became a designer and an art teacher at a local school after finishing his college education⁷.

All three artists presented in this paper produce pieces on commission, including murals, graffiti, oil paintings and small size portraits. The perception of graffiti has gradually changed from an act of vandalism or criminal damage in the 1970s and 1990s (Ferrell, 1996, pp. 106-116) to an innovation and artistic creation, which was prompted by the tourism and advertising industries (Mokras-Grabowska 2016; Kramer 2017, pp. 72-73) and the promotion of global/creative cities (Brighenti 2017, p.120; Perera 2019).

In France, as Fieni (2016) reviewed, the debate on the legitimacy and aesthetic value of graffiti is ongoing, and the French public has gradually begun to tolerate graffiti. Catlin Bruce (2019) documented the unique scenario of the ‘Meeting of Styles (MOS)’ festival in a small city in southern France. In Bruce’s observation (2019, pp. 125-129), in addition to several showcases of graffiti, this festival included social space for drinking and chatting, food trucks, a small library of works about hip-hop and urban art, a cultural center, film screening and dance parties. Bruce’s observation revealed that the discourses of creative cities and urban renewal make the MOS the encountering space for governance and issues with the bourgeois, cultural consumption and tourism.

This marketing strategy on ‘urban art + tourism’ works as a key in the process of transforming ‘vandalism’ to ‘city charm’. For instance, JinLee performed at *La Fête de la Francophonie*, which was organized by the High Commission of Canada & Embassy of France in 2017 (at Giftland Mall, Guyana). Another performance was arranged at *Rendez-Vous de la Francophonie* (in 2017, in Paramaribo, Suriname), which was organized by The French Embassy, The High Commission of Canada and The General Consulate of Haiti. Aligned with Canadian singers and Haitian artists, JinLee and his performing partner contributed to the ‘show’ of cultural diversity in Francophone countries. However, the actual vibe of his performance was difficult to determine in such aggregated scenarios. Thus, current studies need to take a close look at urban art in the city via the presence of discourses that harbor the struggles and tension of urban art in its various forms.

The ‘show’ of cultural diversity sprinkled in media coverages remarks the re-interpretation of street art. In France, articles intensified the creative aspect of art and marked a media tone on youth culture. In 2014, the article ‘*Jin Lee entre rêve et féerie aux Zest’Ivales, samedi*’ featured the sensation, mediation

5 JinLee’s personal website: <http://www.artiste-jinlee.fr/>

6 Pierre-Louis Augereau, ‘Il faut croire en ses rêves: artiste, graffeur, le Montreuillais Tennch Tcha aime partager sa passion.’, October, 31, 2014. *Journal Le Courrier de l’Ouest*, https://www.ouest-france.fr/premium/?article_id=f1c7240b-f0e0-4991-ae88-5800299b3068

7 Personal communication, April, 19, 2017.

and creation elements of his multi-media art performance, exception of JinLee's own journey towards art⁸. In an interview in 2014, the journalist showed great interest in Trench Tcha's art journey and the benefits of 'turning passion into a job'. Undoubtedly, these coverages would provide useful information to make connections with artists' careers and products. But it might eliminate the understanding of agency, motivation and struggle related to these artworks. Thus, to fill the gap, this paper sets out to articulate how the traumatic experiences of Hmong diaspora emerged in their art creation and how the concerns on immigrants' status and social issues contributed to their visual repertoire.

Visualizing Trauma, Delivering Voice

Many Hmong refugees have struggled with depressive disorder, traumatic brain injuries and other refugee-related mental health problems since their arrival in refugee camps and resettlement in a third country (Westermeyer 1988; Adler 1995; Westermeyer and Her 2007:381). Many times, I have heard the elderly individuals recall their 'lost home' by saying '*tham peb nyob saum roob...*' (when we lived in mountains...). They also remember their refugee experience, during which they fled out of Laos in various ways. Unfortunately, these stories have not been heard in the mainstream media, nor have the struggles of these individuals been paid attention to by the public. In France, these elderly individuals have suffered the pain of 'voicelessness' when they seem marginalized.

In 2015, Txeuying decided to create paintings about Hmong culture, including a reed pipe player (*txiv qeej*) playing the *qeej* (reed pipe), a Hmong soldier saying goodbye to his girlfriend, and a Hmong boy trying to swim across the Mekong River with his younger sister but failing (Figure 1). Those paintings made his fame in the Hmong community around the world.



Figure 1. *Drama Mekong* Reproduced courtesy of Txeuying Vang

8 "Jin Lee entre rêve et féerie aux Zest'lvales, samedi", December, 18, 2014. <https://www.ouest-france.fr/pays-de-la-loire/le-poire-sur-vie-85170/jin-lee-entre-reve-et-feerie-aux-zestivales-samedi-3069690>

In the painting *Drama Mekong* (Figure 1), a young man holds his younger sister and roars his sorrow, pain and anger. Behind his back, the sky is overcast with clouds; the dark, cheerless, and cold water threatens to swallow his freedom. This painting reveals a haunting memory of fleeing out from Laos. Between 1975 and 1980, thousands and thousands of Laotian Hmong scuttled across the jungle, were lost over the cliffs, and swam across the Mekong River. Some of them never had the chance to arrive at Thailand. Those who did make it, suffered from and were haunted by nightmares (Adler 1995; Westermeyer & Her 2007).

Txeuying's paintings visualize the traumatic memory of Laotian Hmong refugees. Txeuying said he still remembers what happened with the diaspora, so his paintings afford his personal memories and the experience of his family. The emotion in Txeuying's paintings on refuge illustrates the traumatic experience of the Hmong diaspora and reflects 'secondary traumatization' (Baranowsky et al. 1998; Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008), known as the 'intergenerational transmission of trauma' (Danieli, 1998). By revisiting their traumatic experiences (van der Kolk and Fislser, 1995; also see Robinett's summary 2007), trauma survivors can share their stories to reaffirm the relationship between the common narrative and their lived experiences (Robinett, 2007). In Txeuying's paintings, mobilizing the traumatic experience of the diaspora makes references to the social suffering of being invisible and marginalized in a French society that does not officially recognize the diversity of the population.

Viewing Nostalgia, Building Resilience

The French Republicanism assimilates immigrants into French society and has eliminated spaces for the 'social visibility of ethnic minorities' over decades (Amiroux & Simon 2006; Montague 2013). Youth among the French Hmong seem to lack the social or symbolic capital to become involved in local politics (Billion 2001). Graffiti enables French Hmong artists to reach out to various viewers and foster resistance against such sociopolitical invisibility. JinLee has also claimed, 'I have created different works on social issues'. By criticizing social issues, urban art achieves its triumph to mobilize young citizens to resist against social injustice.

Aligned with illustrating traumatic memory, some artists represented the nostalgia of French Hmong community in their creations. Nostalgia is the deep emotion in diasporic groups that they can't return to their 'homeland' (Lévy & Olazabal, 2015). During fieldwork in the French Hmong community, I have continuously heard elders say, 'when we had lived in Laos... (Thaum peb nyob nplaug teb)' or 'kuv tseem nco txog kuv lub tsev nyob saum roob (I always miss my house in the mountains)'. The poster of the cultural event '*La Semaine Culturelle sur le Peuple Hmong*' (2015) illustrates green mountains, trees and small houses as the symbol of Hmong culture.

Mountains, forests, and houses are also the key elements in JinLee's sand performances. For example, elephants, giraffes, trees and bushes illustrate the serenity of an African safari (Figure 2). The serenity makes viewers forget about the conflicts, violence, and wars in Africa. Most of JinLee's performances focus on the ephemeral beauty of the rural, countryside, and the natural world, more like a utopia. For the Hmong audience, JinLee's performance can carry them back to their 'rural villages' and 'lost home' where the war did not happen. Thus, having access to such a nostalgic mood serves as a key resilience that help these survivals to keep going in a third country. Their nostalgic narrative could help them build resilience against trauma and 'voicelessness'.

9 JinLee's personal website: <http://www.artiste-jinlee.fr/>



Figure 2. Sand Performance by JinLee, video screenshot, reproduced courtesy of JinLee

JinLee's sand performances have also depicted traumatic war stories – couples separated, husbands who went to war and died, and parents losing their son, among other subjects. Through performances, JinLee visualizes trauma and its tragic influence on ordinary people. He said, 'As a child of political refugees, an inhabitant of working-class neighborhoods and a child of globalization, I felt the need to cry out, to express myself'¹⁰. Given its importance, such trauma-focused performances should not be simply interpreted as 'cultural diversity' or the 'decorated flowers of a city tour'. JinLee explained, 'I'm so sad that we (Hmong people) don't have a Hmong country and we are apart in different places. The young generation of Hmong in France don't understand their parents and the older generations. That's the reason I would like to use rap, the street art to call them. Rap is the music of the street; everyone listens to it. It's like a battle'¹¹. For him, rap, graffiti, and other types of urban art connotes with historical memory and suffering, even though it has not yet been fully presented in the mainstream media.

Tagging Urban Space, Sensing Resistance

In the 1980s, hip-hop culture has become popular in France (Fieni 2016:188). Rap artist Abd al Malik has acquired 'unusual visibility' both among ethnic audiences and in the mainstream media (Jouili 2013) by using his own experiences growing up in a suburban area, with former deviant activity, and a personal philosophy on religious choices (Bourderionnet 2011). Graffiti, a crucial part of hip-hop culture, has attracted Hmong artists into its territory. Noël Ly recalled, 'When I was younger, I practised break dance and then drawing..... I like pop culture'¹². JinLee has also claimed, 'It was in the 90s that the first big hip-hop wave arrived, and I naturally found my place in it. Break dance, graffiti, and rap would be my playgrounds'¹³. Graffiti, rap music and break dance encouraged Hmong artists to express passion, opinion and emotion. Tennch Tcha remembered how he was immersed in hip-hop culture through break dance when he was 12 or 13 years old. Tennch recalled, 'my Hmong culture reminds me the immigrant status I

10 JinLee's personal website: <http://www.artiste-jinlee.fr/>

11 Personal communication, December 13, 2021

12 Noël Ly's bio profile at an art exhibition (July 2-31, 2019, Lambesc, France).

13 JinLee's personal website: <http://www.artiste-jinlee.fr/>

belong to and the obligation of building something in a country where you had nothing before'¹⁴. For him, graffiti provides 'infinite' potential to navigate the world and make a creation.

The techniques and skills of graffiti writing were evolving and diversifying in that styles and color palettes changed from realistic to cartoonish and from representational to abstract (Kramer 2017, pp. 12-19). French Hmong artists acquired mature and practical knowledge of creating graffiti. Using letters, drawings, sprayings, characters, and colors, 'you can create anything; there are no limits', Tennch claimed¹⁵. Much of their artworks employ multiple tools and styles, writing, painting, tagging, and stenciling. Moreover, Tennch's commissioned work stands for the concerns on social issues, for example, immigrant issue in France.



Figure 3. The collaborative mural by Tennch Tcha, The Jamet brothers, Alexandra Bomble Genneteau and Tchuj Tcha; reproduced courtesy of Tennch Tcha

In one of their collaborated murals, Tennch and other graffiti writers illustrate the current 'race & immigrants' politics in France. This mural (Figure 3) follows the tradition of political graffiti that echoes social issues and movements. In the French context, graffiti was used in the battle for immigration, social reform or LGBT activism (Debras 2019). This large-scale mural created by Tennch Tcha and other artists shows a sarcastic dinner composed of various religious followers and ethnic minorities in front of the politician Marine Le Pen, who is staring out at them. This mural combined two different worlds. One is the ordinary world, where people enjoy eating and drinking against the scenery of green farmland and country houses. Smiles emerged from Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, Black and Asian guests. The other world is shown from Marine Le Pen's angle, which looks down at the 'joyful' individuals. This 'looking down' angle also connects to the metaphor 'big brother is watching you.'

It is not hard to make the connection with Marine Le Pen's political propaganda, which conveys her agenda to expel immigrants. The issue of immigration was a controversial and primary focus of public

14 Personal communication, June, 12, 2022.

15 Pierre-Louis Augereau, 'Il faut croire en ses rêves: artiste, graffeur, le Montreuillais Tennch Tcha aime partager sa passion.', October 31, 2014. *Journal Le Courrier de l'Ouest*, Link : https://www.ouest-france.fr/premium/?article_id=f1c7240b-f0e0-4991-ae88-5800299b3068

attention during the 2017 presidential election in France. Some politicians blamed immigrants and migrant workers for taking jobs and causing violence. Several debates that focused on this issue urged consideration of many concerns, which are demonstrated in this mural. Tennch said, ‘the customer would like to echo the slogan ‘everyone is welcome to be with us’ as well as the rejection of the extreme rightism embodied by Marine Le Pen’¹⁶.

This merit of resistance remains in graffiti culture because writers have included historical references and political indexicality in graffiti. [Ferrell \(1995\)](#) has suggested that graffiti writers practice alternative ways of collective activity and interethnic collaboration. Tagging, piecing, and incorporation serve as intertextual conversations and support for ethnic youth. Similarly, Tennch Tcha has collaborated with other artists to create large-scale murals. Such collaboration could be seen as an alternative approach to resistance.

Conclusion

Forty years after the resettlement in France, the second generation of Hmong refugees is grown up and is using various strategies to negotiate its ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Artists express their opinions, feelings and visions through a variety of artistic creations ([Shi 2022](#)). Some urban art visualizes the traumatic experiences of the Hmong and calls upon the audience’s reflection. Appreciation of oil painting, sand performance, and graffiti provides a visual space in which audiences are connected through trauma, sadness, and the yearning to return to the ‘homeland’. The second-generation artists, as evidenced by the analysis presented in this paper, engage in the diasporic experience and collective memory of trauma, but they also deliver calls for resistance against the dominant culture. Urban art helps them address their concern that social invisibility and immobility have profound effects on marginalized groups and shows that they seek to address this imbalance in the French context.

Underrepresented young people around the world now incorporate urban art into their handling of local representations ([Latorre 2018](#); [Smith 2018](#)). The three artists whose work is the focus of this paper have worked with young people in the Hmong community to develop their skills in various genres of urban art. Urban art, as [Campos et al. \(2021\)](#) demonstrated, stimulates the energy and power of ‘disenfranchised youth’ to shape strategies, participate in global politics and create an aesthetic intervention. Urban art promotes disempowered groups in creating alternative spaces of agency, narratives and representations through various techniques, skills, and styles.

In this paper, I demonstrate that French Hmong artists and their artwork visualize the traumatic memories and suffering and also go beyond that. These artists spread messages that encourage young people to come together and call for resistance against social invisibility and immobility. This study contributes to the literature that explores the agency and creativity of underrepresented minority artists in a global society.

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¹⁶ Personal communication, June, 12, 2022.

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