

Cultural Concretions:

Hmong Creative Adaptation in Vietnam

Jean Michaud and Sarah Turner

The proliferation of concrete, entwined with the expansion of transport networks, water-management systems and educational infrastructure, is reshaping the tangible and intangible landscapes of the rural uplands of northern Vietnam. This metamorphosis is not merely physical but deeply cultural too, altering the symbolic meanings of the very notions of home and life. We focus on consequences of such transformative effects for Hmong, who number about 1.5 million individuals in Vietnam and are one of the ethnic minority societies dwelling in these remote uplands.

Our analysis is anchored in the recent infrastructural turn, urging a re-evaluation of infrastructure not just as physical entities such as roads and irrigation systems, but as dynamic systems entwined with sociopolitical, ecological and cultural processes (Amin 2014; Wilson 2016; Datta and Ahmed 2020). This infrastructural perspective underscores concrete's role both as a building material and as a sociomaterial agent,

intricately involved in the reconstitution of cultural norms and the articulation of new forms of community resilience within the evolving landscapes of modernity (Harvey and Knox 2016; Turner 2022). Through ethnographic engagement with Hmong communities conducted over three decades, we scrutinize their shifts in livelihoods and the increasing integration of industrial technologies, including concrete, within their social fabric.

Concrete Flows

Until recently, many Hmong were rotational swidden farmers. They practised a semi-nomadic way of life, in which an immovable dwelling was neither practical nor desirable (Lee and Tapp 2010). Hmong houses have long been characterized by earthen floors, with construction materials such as bamboo and wood, along with plant stalks or foliage for thatch. Building techniques were dependent on the availability of natural resources, which varied across altitude, climate and vegetation cover. Hmong villages have now been permanently settled, some for generations, yet their dwellings continue to be culturally embedded with beliefs coherent with Hmong animistic worldviews.¹

¹ There are Hmong who have turned to Christianity or Buddhism, but we focus on the majority who maintain an animist worldview.



Typical Hmong house built on dirt, Hau Thao Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province. Photo: Authors, 2014.

The escalating prevalence of concrete in Vietnam during the twentieth century, driven by French colonialism and market trends, has instigated a paradigm shift that transcends mere architectural logic. To this historical process must be added a steady push by Vietnam's socialist government to harness the full potential of the natural resources of these uplands – such as minerals, hydroelectricity, water and the rich flora and fauna (Scott 2009; Michaud et al. 2016). Here, “infrastructure, as a material force and ideological tool, has been a key avenue for the reorganization of territory and the domination of nature” (Buier 2023: 56).



Interior of a Hmong house with a dirt floor, Su Pan Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province.
Photo: Authors, 2011.

Once road networks reached previously secluded communities, industrial goods soon followed: metals, fabrics, machinery, petrol, roof-tiles, bricks and cement. In time, even cash-strapped, semi-subsistence Hmong farmers were able to purchase bags of cement. They quickly realized concrete's potential as a robust material that could take virtually any shape with a rough frame, sand, aggregate, water, and simple gravity. Gradually, dirt tracks gained a thin concrete surface for the smoother circulation of small vehicles during the rainy season, while concrete water channels, pig pens and domestic water reservoirs proliferated. We have also observed the adoption of concrete within houses over time, but this has occurred last. A Hmong woman explained: "we preferred the soil under our feet and the concrete seemed unnatural"; while a Hmong man stated, "well, we have it now, but we had to work out what the spirits would do" (interviews 2019, 2022). In other words, this delay was due to the sacredness associated with human homes and the enduring habitus of life events – birth, rituals, death – which have historically unfolded on dirt floors.

Hmong Households Navigating Concrete

Concrete floors in houses are gaining popularity as a practical way to shield inhabitants from increasingly cold weather events (Delisle and Turner 2016). In areas like Đồng Văn District (Hà Giang Province), where timber is scarce, cinder blocks – an alternative form of concrete – are frequently used for Hmong buildings. In economically booming upland areas, such as Sa Pa District (Lào Cai Province), many Hmong houses have started doubling as homestays, catering for tourists. This has led to a surge in the use of concrete, bricks and mortar for construction, complete with concreted outhouses for showers and flush toilets. Inside houses, concrete is now commonly used for the constantly wet kitchen area. The socialist state's push for modern standards nationwide

has influenced this trend (Kleinen 2015; Turner 2022; Michaud and Bilodeau 2024). For example, through its New Countryside Programme (Nông thôn Mới), initiated in 2009, the Vietnamese state seeks to “build a new countryside with a gradual modernization of socioeconomic infrastructure [...] and to increasingly improve people’s material and spiritual life following a socialist orientation” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam 2010, our translation). Moreover, rural communes that meet specific criteria are deemed New Communes, rewarded “with funds to build particular items of infrastructure” (Nguyen 2017: 5; World Bank 2017).



New Hmong house on a concrete slab with low brick walls, Seo Mi Ty Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province.
Photo: Authors, 2023.

While the adoption of concrete in isolated communities happens the world over (Forty 2012), such changes to Hmong houses have been accompanied by careful consideration for the safe travel of the souls of the deceased. For Hmong, ancestors linger in the form of ghosts, using specific routes to move around. An important ritual in this regard is thus the burial of the newborn’s placenta.² The placenta (*tsho*) is customarily interred within the home for a connection to the ancestors. In the case of sons, the father digs a hole in the dirt floor for the placenta “by the center house post, and a spirit bridge stretches from the shaman altar, via the center post, to the door” (Symonds 2004: 17). For daughters, it is generally buried under the parents’ bed “to ensure that she will be the mother of many children” (ibid.: 46). This ritual is perceived as essential for the soul of any deceased family member to safely return, retrieve their placenta and wear it to travel to the ancestors’ world (Fadiman 1997; Helsel and Mochel 2002).

Modern construction, especially reinforced concrete, disrupts this ritual. As Star (1999: 380) observes, “what is one person’s infrastructure is another’s topic, or difficulty.” In response, Hmong families have found ways to continue this practice and avoid hindering the safe flow of spiritual essence. A recent Hmong mother in Sa Pa district explained that her husband dug into the concrete slab of their house using hand tools to bury their daughter’s placenta: “We left the hole open for a month. If our daughter had had

² A ritual practice also found among the Māori of New Zealand, the Navajo and in regions of Cambodia and Bolivia, to name a few (Buckley 2006).



*Kitchen area of a new Hmong house with concrete floor and cinder block walls plastered with mortar, Su Pan Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province.
Photo: Authors, 2023.*



*Customary Hmong hearth, a Hmong spiritual element, shaped into a concrete slab, Ta Phin Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province.
Photo: Authors, 2019.*

a bad cough at that time, we'd have poured warm water on the placenta" (interview 2023). The warm water would promote the child's health both immediately and in the long term. After one month, her husband resealed the hole with fresh concrete, thereby maintaining both the physical integrity of the house and the spiritual needs of the family. Other interviewees in both Lào Cai and Hà Giang provinces concurred with such an approach.

Lee and Tapp (2010) note that Hmong who have migrated to urban settings or to Western countries tend to abandon these practices. The impracticality of performing the ritual on Western-style flooring is a significant factor, as is the challenge of obtaining a newborn's placenta from a hospital.³ There is a likelihood that the same may occur in rural Vietnam over time. Nonetheless, interviews conducted as recently as early 2024 indicate that this is not yet the case.

³ In upland Vietnam, Hmong women giving birth in local hospitals often encounter the same situation, where predominantly ethnic majority Kinh doctors retain the placenta for incineration.

Hmong Everyday Politics: Digging Through State Modernization Priorities

This transition to concrete-based infrastructure by Hmong in Vietnam not only represents an architectural transformation, it also triggers cultural adjustments. Practices deeply embedded in the natural and supernatural worlds are renegotiated as they are influenced by political policies and market forces. For the government, the adoption of concrete is a visible marker of modernization, aligning with state-driven initiatives to enhance infrastructure and foster economic growth in the uplands (Duncan 2004; Chettri and Eilenberg 2021). For Hmong households, these opportunities are sometimes welcomed for their practicality; yet they can also be met with a selective embrace in order to maintain core elements of vernacular cultural practices wherever feasible (Michaud 2017).

Hmong households' discreet maintenance of rituals, such as the burial of a new-born's placenta beneath the concrete, embodies a form of everyday politics woven into the rhythms of their lives (Kerkvliet 2009). These acts, though seemingly mundane, are entwined with affirmations of identity and autonomy, supporting the argument that "the materiality of infrastructure shapes affective bonds and practices of solidarity" (Abel and Coleman 2020: xxiii). The disruption of placenta burial practices by concrete is emblematic of broader tensions between customary lifeways and the imperatives of state-led modernization. This intersection becomes a fertile ground for the infrapolitical tactics of Hmong households, subtly embedding new material landscapes within their particular worldviews (Michaud 2012).

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