



Extramarital Court and Flirt of Guizhou Miao¹

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Abstract

The Miao in Eastern Guizhou, *Hmub* is providing an alternative in the theorizing of courtship and marriage, since they have a flirtation zone for continued expression of personal desire within a larger context of social restraint. Today, much like before 1949, there are two forms of institutional flirt as manifested in everyday and ritualized settings. One is the long term flirtation alliance lasting during the life time of one's own marriage, while the short term will end either with a break up or marriage. The textual description of the *Hmub* courting songs also reveals there are no necessary relations between marriage and courtship, and the hybrid display of flirtatious physical contacts are among courting men and women with diverse genealogical ties, affinal relations and marital status—unmarried and married. Along this direction, this article explores how the *Hmub* may be a special case of allowing for a private personal emotional zone to be created within a highly structured or institutional setting that honors social status, age and gender separation. Institutionalized flirting of the *Hmub* does serve as a means to an end—marriage, a sociological identity. It is also the psychological reassurance of one's personal identity in the form of a viable, sexual and desirable human being.

Keywords

courtship, marriage, extramarital flirting, Miao (*Hmub*), Southwest China

Generally speaking, no women in any culture and society are indifferent to their partners' extramarital affairs.² Even women in societies with double standards in this regard, would become anxious and angry whenever their own spouse or partner is sexually involved with other women. They assume that

¹ *Acknowledgements.* I am grateful to Fangf Bil *Hmub* villagers; to William Jankowiak, Shanshan Du, Robert Parkin, Jude Lam and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments.

² Jankowiak, W., M.D. Nell and A. Buckmaster, "Managing Infidelity: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Ethnology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (2001), pp. 85–101.

even a brief sexual encounter has the potential to undermine the marital bond. Thus, continued vigilance is required. Most studies of extramarital affairs focused only on the community's reaction to the affair. These studies note that there are double standard societies where men are allowed to enter into an affair while the women cannot. Some cultures distinguish between emotional involvement and sexual involvement. For example, evolutionary psychologists found that American women make a distinction between emotional involvement and sexual involvement. For them, emotional threat to their marriage or other forms of relationship is more serious than their partner's incidental sexual trysts with a stranger. In general, "young men are more distressed by a partner's sexual infidelity, whereas young women are more distressed by a partner's emotional infidelity".³ However, there are few studies of women's reactions to their partners' flirtations in either formal or informal contexts.⁴

During my fieldwork in a *Hmub* village in Guizhou (1998–2000), when I first heard about "extramarital flirtation", I wondered whether wives became angry or jealous when their husbands deliberately flirted with other girls in the evening. One woman said to me, "No, I am not unhappy at my husband singing for another girl at night. That means he has a good voice." The term "flirtation" is tentatively used in translating the native term of *iut fub* among the *Hmub* in eastern Guizhou. I will introduce how the *Hmub* dialectic term of *iut fub* defined locally with details later. Briefly, *iut fub* for the natives can transcend the line between unmarried and married, creating an extramarital flirting zone. This *Hmub* practice stands in sharp contrast to that of their neighbors, the Lahu, who identify intimacy with monogamous marriage, while love is expressed as harmonious teamwork in marriage.⁵ Though monogamous marriage has also been long practiced here and the marital bond will continue to tie the couple as ancestors after life, today, much like before 1949, the *Hmub* approve and institutionalize extramarital flirtation for men until their middle age (approximately between thirty to forty years old) and for women until they become married mothers. The flirting practices of the *Hmub* in eastern

³ Shackelford, T.K., M. Voracek, D.P. Schmit, D.M. Buss, V.A. Weekes-Shackelford, and R.L. Michalski, "Romantic Jealousy in Early Adulthood and in Later Life," *Human Nature*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2004), pp. 283–300.

⁴ Buss, D.M., *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵ Du, S.S., *Chopsticks Only Work in Pairs: Gender Unity and Gender Equality among the Lahu of Southwest China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Guizhou may be offering an alternative in the current theorizing of courtship and marriage, since they have a flirtation zone for continued expression of personal desire within the larger context of social restraint.⁶ In this article, I will explore how the *Hmub* may be a special case of allowing for a private personal emotional zone to be created within a highly structured or institutionalized setting that honors social status, age and gender separation. Institutionalized flirting of the *Hmub* does serve as a means to an end—marriage, a sociological identity that people in the community will often talk about. It is also the psychological reassurance of one's personal identity as a viable, sexual and desirable human being.

Courtship and Marriage

In *The Sexual Life of Savages in North Western Melanesia*, Malinowski noted that “a subject like sex cannot be treated except in its institutional setting”. Courtship was considered one significant customary restraint. For him, love, eroticism, magic and mythology all shape part of a culture's courtship process.⁷ However, he did not treat courtship as filling an autonomous niche. In his words, “courtship again, is a phase, a preparatory phase, of marriage, and marriage but one side of family life”.⁸ Although he emphasized the functional value of courtship, he always considered it an aspect of a larger social construction. He never considered it capable of having an autonomous dimension independent of its social function, which was to bring men and women together in some form of marital arrangement. Studies of early American courtship found that although young Americans enjoyed relative autonomy in choosing mates, they “had on average only two other relationships before meeting their future

⁶ Such distinction is important because that can be related to the debates over the link between individual feelings, emotions, and collective representations. For example in his work on Robert Hertz and the study of “sin,” Robert Parkin points that “in a more general sense, one can say that much of Durkheim and Mauss's work concerned the nature and maintenance of social control; Hertz's magnum opus would have been concerned with the contrasting but related theme of what happens when the individual goes against society's injunctions.” Parkin, R., *The Dark Side of Humanity: The Work of Robert Hertz and its Legacy* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), p. 124.

⁷ Malinowski, B., *The Sexual Life of Savages in North Western Melanesia: An Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage, and Family Life among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982 [1932]), p. xx.

⁸ Malinowski, B., *The Sexual Life of Savages in North Western Melanesia*, p. xx.

husband and wives”.⁹ From these findings, the relationship between American courtship and marriage is not very different from the Melanesian societies. In contrast to presenting courtship as a phase preparatory to marriage, other literature, especially those focused on narratives or performances, revealed different facets of courtship and diverse connections between courtship and marriage.¹⁰ These works also explored their entangled relations. Through analyzing historical archives, Ellen Rothman highlighted personal experiences and narratives of courting and found that “courtship was not a linear progression but an amalgam of expectation, experience, and convention ... the nature of courtship defies precise explanations. The vicissitudes of love, the selection of a mate, the decisions people make as they approach marriage are always somewhat mysterious to an outsider”.¹¹

Focusing on Elizabethan language and literature, Catherine Bates also explored the rhetoric of courtship. She described courtship as “a highly nuanced and exceptionally complex literary and political procedure”.¹² In her words, “courtship is a delicate, fraught, hazardous procedure which requires constant prudence, tact and subtlety because it depends for its effectiveness upon the appearance of sincerity, an appearance which could (and at times had to be) carefully calculated”.¹³ Courtship then is like a highly codified system, “a mode which puts sincerity and deception in a teasing and often inextricable juxtaposition”.¹⁴ Following such knowledge on courtship, it is not strange to arrive at the following conclusion on the ambivalence of courtship and marriage in her work:

Whether courtship exists outside marriage altogether or whether it is a prelude to marriage the crucial point is that it is never the same as marriage. Courtship stands in a

⁹ Cate, R.M., and S.A. Lloyd, *Courtship. Sage Series on Close Relationships* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), p. 32. Robins, E. and T.L. Huston, “Testing Compatibility Testing.” Paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Meeting, St. Paul, MN, 1983.

¹⁰ Rothman, E., *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). Bates, C., *The Rhetoric of Courtship: In Elizabethan Language and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Mainardi, P., *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers: Marriage and Its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Rothman, E., *Hands and Hearts*, p. 5.

¹² Bates, C., *The Rhetoric of Courtship*, p. 2.

¹³ Bates, C., *The Rhetoric of Courtship*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Bates, C., *The Rhetoric of Courtship*, p. 2.

peculiarly ambivalent indeterminate relation to marriage. For it remains a preliminary process—what happens before marriage, or outside the conjugal unit—and therefore exists temporarily ‘outside’ the law, which that conjugality represents.¹⁵

“If you persist in talking passion while I am talking marriage, we shall soon cease to understand each other” (quoted from Comtesse de Carigliano in Balzac’s *At the Sign of the Cat and Rocket*).¹⁶ Such ambivalence of marriage and the personal happiness of man and woman was the main theme of *Husbands, Wives and Lovers*.¹⁷ In this work, Patricia Mainardi discussed marriage and its discontents in nineteenth-century France from art and literature. Focused on the issue of adultery, the author attempted to examine the “contradiction” between marriage and individual feelings. Moving from historical narrative to representations in literature or art, at the end Mainardi tried to explore further about personal happiness, concluding that the ideal relations between men and women should be in the modern world.¹⁸

From these abundant and varying sources of literature, courtship has been described as having a functional relationship with marriage; others view it as serving to highlight a unilineal progression of shifting status arrangements whereby people move from single to married; still others see it as a more fluid or entangled relationship and, thus, not a clear cut route to marriage. Expressing the relationship between or separation of courtship and marriage, these studies significantly theorized the seriousness of court. Linear and dialectical perspectives are both important in understanding complicated courting cultures. This article will show that the *Hmub* may be a special case since they demonstrate *the* two relationships (lineal and dialectical) between courtship and marriage within one institution by two forms of flirtation, long term and short term.

Field Setting and Research Methods

Fangf Bil is a *Hmub* village perched high on a hillside on the upper reaches of the Qingshuijiang River. It forms part of the northern subgroup of the *Hmub* in Guizhou.¹⁹ Fangf Bil is part of Fanzao Township, Taijiang County, southeastern Guizhou Self-Governing District, Guizhou Province. The people

¹⁵ Bates, C., *The Rhetoric of Courtship*, p. 19.

¹⁶ Mainardi, P., *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*, p. 213.

¹⁷ Mainardi, P., *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*, p. 213.

¹⁸ Mainardi, P., *Husbands, Wives, and Lovers*.

¹⁹ Yang, T.S., *Renqun Daima de Lishi Ghocheng—Yi Miao zu Zuming Wei Li* (The Historical

in this village call themselves *Hmub*, which is cognate with *Hmong*. The village is composed of over 330 households and has a population of almost 1,500 persons. It is divided into eleven hamlets (*vangf*), whose respective names refer to some nearby geographic feature.

The residents of any single hamlet will generally be the agnatic descendants of a lineage sub-segment and share a common Han Chinese surname. The naming system is patronymic. Regardless of gender, a person's name is composed of his or her name preceded by his or her father's name, the father's name being preceded by his or father's name in turn. Han Chinese surnames appear to have come into use only in the eighteenth century, with the intrusion of the Chinese State. Han Chinese surnames are seldom heard in everyday *Hmub* discourse, but they accord with the patrilineal spirit of Fangf Bil naming practices.

The eleven hamlets of Fangf Bil village are organized into five patrilineal marriage groups. Marriage within a marriage group is forbidden. The five marriage groups have the five Han Chinese surnames of Zhang, Tang, Wan, Yang and Tai. However, the correspondence between the Chinese surnames and the marriage groups is not absolute. Hamlets, surnames and patrilineal marriage groups are all organized, one way or another, around ancestor descent groups. These groups are generally localized residentially and share a common male ancestor, corporate ancestral rites and corporate agricultural land. The surnames and hamlets roughly coincide with the marriage groups, but it is only the marriage groups that correspond directly with ancestor descent groups.

This paper is based on my long term fieldwork in Fangf Bil village. Started with a pre-field summer trip in 1997, followed by a main fieldwork for my dissertation from November of 1998 to February of 2000, and an additional summer field trip in 2004, I have conducted a village based ethnographical research related to marriage and flirting on the *Hmub* for more than 20 months. Combining with the anthropological methods of participant observation, in-depth interview and long term residence in the village, I attempted to explore the interplay between personal emotions (erotic, romantic, or flirtatious feelings) and social institutions (marriage and courtship). At the beginning of my fieldwork, I focused on the studying of the social structure of the *Hmub* village. I did a census of more than 300 households and drew up the pedigrees and genealogical records for each family as discovered through semi-structured

Process of Signs in Human Groups: the Case of *Hmong* and *Hmub* Nationality Names) (Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin Chuban She, 1998), p. 99.

interviews.²⁰ Additionally, I collected the kinship terms employed by native speakers and recorded the actual use of the terminology in both everyday and ritualized settings. This datum outlining of the social networks of the *Hmub* village enabled me to understand the personal relationships between families and between individuals. It is important to describe the marital ideals provided by my informants, as well as the reality of marriage, to see where they converge and where they differ in detail.

Another focus of this paper was the private domain of sentiments. By examining how the *Hmub* behaved in institutional flirting settings as well as analyzing their love songs, I was able to enter into the emotional world of the “young people” (*vangt*).²¹ But this entailed a problem: I was already the young mother of two sons when I carried out the research project for my Ph.D. dissertation. For any woman in the village to be a mother meant she would be defined as “old” (*lok*) and, therefore, excluded from most institutional flirting activities. However, the villagers still regarded me as “a young girl”, despite my actual social status as defined by their conventions. One of the reasons was probably because of my dress, which was no different from the local unmarried girls.²² Wearing a youth’s clothing combined with being an outsider, plus being a “Han Chinese” doctoral student from Taiwan enabled me to participate in and observe the young peoples’ flirting interactions and daily life. The Fangf Bil villagers were accustomed in their encounter with local Han Chinese but it was still a fresh experience for most of them that I, a Taiwanese female graduate, was living in the village with them for more than one and half years continually. Besides asking me about the purpose of my research, they especially liked to ask me about political, economical, cultural, and everyday issues with regards to Taiwan when I had opportunities to chat with them.

Institutionalized flirting activities can take in the forms either of get-togethers or of “talking love” throughout the night underneath a young woman’s window. Although I participated directly in many get-togethers, I was able to listen to but not directly observe them during their conversations. I was

²⁰ Pedigree is recording basic demographic data (such as name, age, marriage, birth) of the members of each household. Genealogical records express consanguine and affine relations among households, family, and lineages.

²¹ The “young people” with quotation mark in this paper indicates that the people involved in courtship are not always young people in its strict sense; especially on the occasions of festival courtship activities and singing antiphonal songs, there are lots of old people participating in them.

²² The unmarried young women wear trousers and coats bought from the outside, usually blouses or sportswear in summer and woolen sweaters in winter.

able to interview the girls later as to what was exchanged. Flirting activities in the village can be open, conveying some features of ritualized performance, but they can also be very private and personal encounters. Without the girls accompanying me during fieldwork and their willingness to let me share in their “romantic” or flirtatious emotions and experiences, I would not have been able to understand the content and contextual value of the institutionalized flirtation between individuals.

During my fieldwork, I lived in the home of an unmarried girl. I was able to develop a close fictive relationship with her as evident that we easily and readily called each other sister. In my fieldwork, this girl accompanied me day and night, which enable me to share from her, at times, her friend’s experiences, moods and views on marriage and feelings about men.

At Khait (“Getting Married”)

The primary structural factors that shape long term (extramarital) flirting are: bilateral cross-cousin marriage, village endogamy, and duo-local post-marital residence. The terminological system of this village is similar to the Dravidian-type structure of the kinship terminology in conjunction with the ideal and practice of prescriptive cross-cousin marriage. In terms of classificatory kin relations, most women in Fangf Bil still marry either their classificatory matrilineal or patrilineal cross cousins: that is, either marriages of father’s sister’s daughter with mother’s brother’s son (FZD/MBS) or mother’s brother’s daughter with father’s sister’s son (MBD/FZS) occur.²³ Nevertheless, the practice of cross-cousin marriage is still related to how kin are classified in Fangf Bil, a community that clearly distinguishes between near and distant kin. Thus bilateral cross-cousin marriage is not actually father’s sister’s son (FZS) or mother’s brother’s son (MBS), but rather between members of patrilineal descent groups who are related to one another. These are either as classificatory patrilineal cross cousin (FZHBS, FZHFBSS, or FZHFFBSSS), who are equated terminologically with the father’s sister’s son (FZS), or as classificatory matrilineal cross cousin (MFBSS, or MFFBSSS), who are equated terminologically with the

²³ FZD means father’s sister’s daughter; MBS, mother’s brother’s son; MBD, mother’s brother’s daughter; FZS, father’s sister’s son. Hereafter, I follow the kin abbreviations: F = father, M = mother, B = brother, Z = sister, G = sibling, E = spouse, S = son, D = daughter, P = parent, C = child, e = elder, y = younger, ms = man speaker, ws = woman speaker, etc. Barnard, A. and A. Good, *Research Practices in the Study of Kinship*. (London: Academia Press, 1984), p. 4.

mother's brother's son (MBS). This means there are classificatory FZD/MBS and classificatory MBD/FZS marriages. Parallel with the marriage rule, the binary organizations of the groups of Fangf Bil are given classificatory reality in the distinction between *gad ghat* (agnates, literally “hosts” or “us”) and *khait* (affines, literally “guests”). Marriage is prohibited between *gad ghat* (or simply *ghat*), but permitted with *khait*. The centrality of the relationships between *ghat* and *khait* in Fangf Bil village is indicative of the importance of kinship in the village social process.

Village endogamy is also important in exploring the practice of cross cousin marriage in the village. The Chang Family and Tang Family marriage groups have a combined population of over 90 percent of Fangf Bil's total population. The ratio of intermarriages between the two marriage groups far exceeds marriages outside of the village. The six hamlets of the two marriage groups depend on one another for the vast majority of their wives. In short, the two groups seem to constitute something approaching a categorically binary structure. Ultimately, most marriages take place within the village through a system of classificatory bilateral cross cousin marriage.

Duo-local post-marital residence (or delayed transferred marriage) is the third institutional feature to assist the institutionalization of long-term flirtation. Generally, a bride in a *Hmub* village does not live with the groom after the wedding ceremony but immediately return to stay with her natal kin. This custom of duo-local residence is called *niangt zix* (literally “sitting at home or staying at home”). The wife visits the husband's house only on festival days or to assist in the farm work of her husband's family until their first child is born. During this period the wife still wears the garments of an unmarried woman. Whether doing farm work in the daytime or engaging in flirting activities in the evening, the wife spends most of her time with other unmarried women or other married women who are similarly “staying at her own natal parent's home.”²⁴

During the duo-local period, both wife and husband can freely attend their own flirting activities separately. The wife still can talk about love or joke along with other boys who flirt with her by her bedroom window in the evening when she is staying at her own parents' home (see the following paragraph for more details of institutionalized flirting activities). Her personal leisure time and individual feelings at engaging in such extramarital flirting will not come to an end until she has become a mother and begins to live regularly with

²⁴) They consider themselves classificatory sisters.

her husband. In the *Hmub* village, most wives will become mothers one or two years after their marriage. Only a few are still living in their natal homes more than “three, four or five years”²⁵ after marriage. No matter how old a wife or husband becomes, if they have not yet had children, they will continue to be considered “young” women or bachelors, and their marital status will remain vague, especially in regard to long term flirting activities. In general, the combination of prescriptive cross-cousin marriage with village endogamy continually creates a small world, generation after generation, which means that the *Hmub* prefer to form and maintain their social world by production and reproduction within one village, ideologically and sociologically. However, such cohesive social constraint of intra-village affinal alliance leaves a place for duo-local residence, *niangt zix*, which demonstrates the fluidity between flirting and marriage. As described earlier, duo-local residence provides the opportunity for the married men and women to control their extramarital flirting activity. This is an important characteristic in addition to the collective and institutional aspects of the cross cousin marriage of the *Hmub*. The fluidity of the flirting will be discussed with more details later.

Besides the institutional aspect and the prescribed rules, however, we also need to see *Hmub* marriage from the perspective of the social actors. Marriages in Fangf Bil occur after a brief courtship, and may or may not involve romantic love. They can be either public marriages (*ghaif zix bat mongf*, literally “to be sent away from home by the bride’s parents”) or elopements (*at dlius mongf*, literally “to go away secretly”).²⁶ Nowadays, most marriages are decided by the

²⁵) This is a *Hmub* idiom which means a couple of years.

²⁶) The two kinds of marriages show their differences in certain ways. Almost all the public marriages are arranged marriages that take the form of prescriptive cross-cousin marriage with village endogamy, and they have a more complicated wedding ceremony. Other rituals are involved in public marriages. First, the bride’s family will approve of her leaving by undertaking a ceremony involving the slaughter of a chicken. She may leave if the eyes of a chicken killed by the groom or the bride’s brothers are open. Another ritual involves a ceremonial farewell in which the bride shares a cup of wine with her brothers to express farewell. After these rituals are performed, the bride leaves her family’s house. Wearing formal *Hmub* clothes and silver ornaments, the bride in a public marriage departs for her groom’s house with her “parallel” sisters in the daytime. Elopements, on the other hand, are much simpler, and lack the rituals of the public marriages. Elopements violate village endogamy and are finalized when the bride, wearing a dress bought from the market (*ux Diuk*, literally “the Han dress”), cross the threshold of the house alone with her groom in the middle of the night. Such marriages occur without her family’s consent or knowledge. Elopements of the *Hmub* are not necessarily related to romantic love. However, we may consider elopement from the perspective of a bride’s weighing the uncertainties and

young people themselves, whether public marriages or elopements. To become socially recognized as *Hmub* adults, they are expected to be married *and* have children. Once the wife and the husband have had their own first child, they will begin to live together. The nuclear family, consisting of a couple and their unmarried children in one household, is the most common form in a *Hmub* village.

Sharing ideas, knowledge, feelings and cooperation in both the production of resources and reproduction are obvious aspects of the daily life of each married couple. Couples talk to each other often at home, especially during meals. They discuss the division of their farm work and housework, exchange ideas on how to solve family problems and bring up children, and share news, jokes, rumors, scandals or arguments which are circulating among the other villagers. Whenever I visited or stayed in a household I often heard couples chatting, but sometimes I heard them quarrelling or fighting. Interactions between spouses inside their own home seem normal. But what impressed me strongly was their indifference toward each another once outside their house.

The spouses are expected to walk out separately, ideally with their same-sex relatives, whether they are going to do farm work, engage in ritual activities, or visit relatives. A married couple walking together around the village is considered impolite and inappropriate behavior. Yet, when they are beyond the public's gaze, the *Hmub* actually seek out private encounters that allow them to engage in emotionally satisfying and intensely intimate interactions with members of the opposite sex. *This is the Hmub institutionalized extra-marital flirting.*

Iut Fub (“Institutionalized Flirting”)

Courtship is very common as an intentional performance with the goal of marriage in many societies. This is also true for men and women of many other *Hmub* or *Hmong* villages who spend a great deal of time together, expressing personal sentiments through talking, singing and intimate physical contact. However, it is not necessarily and simply so for the *Hmub* in eastern Guizhou.

special ambivalence of an alternative cognatic marriage against the certainties and general ambivalence of a restricted marriage. Moreover, elopements make intelligible Miao (*Hmub*) ambivalence about the collective marital ideal and individuality (Chien 2005). Chien, M.L., “Miao Elopement in Eastern Guizhou: Ambivalent Collective and Individual.” *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (2005), pp. 49–86.

Long Term and Short Term

Classificatory cross-cousins flirt in the Fangf Bil society is similar to a classic symmetric joking relation. Flirtation between *Hmub* cross cousins demonstrates the marriageability of a potential spouse. Such view is roughly correspondent with that of Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Dumont, and McDougal.²⁷ But more than from the perspective of structuralism this paper explores relationships between marriage and courtship, and between individual feelings and social institutions, through *Hmub* cross-cousin flirtation. There are two forms of *Hmub* courtship that can be defined as long and short term flirtation. The long term alliance may last during the lifetime of one's own marriage, while the short term will end in a break up or, if both parties involved are single, marriage. But whether the flirtation is long or short, both may constitute the similar features of flirtation (with details later). It is still different from the conventional ideal of the exclusiveness of one-to-one romantic love (or passion). Yet, this distinction between long term and short term *Hmub* flirting may not be expressed strictly or explicitly by local views. The indigenous conceptualization of a young person for the *Hmub* includes teenagers to adults and even middle-aged men and women who have married within the past few years. Briefly, unmarried men or women (whether single or divorced) and married men or women without children are considered young persons who can attend flirting activities freely.

During long term flirtation, love tokens are exchanged to express one's feelings, such as flower belts or coats. Men may tie two or three flower belts from their former lovers over their daughter's *Hmub* clothing when they are 2 or 3 years old. If the coat is a souvenir of separation with their former lovers, men or women may still wear it when they are in their forties or fifties. Yet, there are boundaries, especially in long term flirtation that cannot be transcended, with rules regulating the flirting activities of married men and women. A married woman can flirt with her male affine until she has delivered her first child. However, married men can participate in extra-marital flirtation after they become a father. Moreover, men are allowed to flirt with his female affine until his children reach their teens. Here exists a gender bias in favor of men.

Iut fub, literally meaning "wandering in the village," is never used in day-to-day conversations among the villagers, because it indicates sexuality. Instead, they use *Hmub* expressions such as *at zot* ("play for fun"), *lof vud* ("take a

²⁷ Parkin, R. "The Joking Relationship and Kinship: Charting a Theoretical Dependency." *Journal of the Anthropological Society for Oxford*. Vol. 24, No. 3 (1993), pp. 251–263.

rest”), *god* (“get together”) and *niangt* (“sit down”), which have nothing to do with sexuality. *Iut fub* is nonetheless an indispensable part of *Hmub* social life. It occurs during particular time and space, and with a special group of individuals. On ordinary days, *iut fub* may take place every night for the young people. After supper, the old people and the children go to bed early. The whole village falls into darkness and quiet except for the faint lights in the windows of each family. After a period of silence, whistles (*kot ghait*) are blown vigorously and without restriction into the dark night. Footsteps are heard, together with hush conversations. The boys initiate the sounds calling for girls to enter into a flirting exchange. Thus the boys from the Tang family will go to the Zhang family and vice versa. When the footsteps slow down, knocking is heard at a girl’s window inviting her to talk to him. If the girl opens the window, they may talk in a gentle voice. If a whole group of boys flirts with a girl, the conversation will be loudly filled with humorous remarks.

The flirting boys also try to find out where a group of girls may be together. Once the girls are located, the boys join them in conversation. At midnight the group’s conversation changes into a dyadic or one-to-one exchange called *ib laik del ib laik* (“one likes the other”). Such conversations may continue deep into the night and stop after the cock crows once or twice. Some exchanges may continue until daybreak.

As I have described in the previous paragraphs, the people participating in *iut fub* should ideally be *vangt* (the “young people”). However, there is no strict limitation on their age and status (married or single). These exchanges between men and women from different marital status and age cohorts appear to be conducted, especially by the woman, from a more detached role posture. Young women are clearly more restrained in flirtation with someone outside their age cohort. For example, once, at a “girls’ get-together” (*god dat ghaif*) flirting activity, I heard a young girl call a man who had put his hands on her shoulders intimately “maternal uncle” (*daid nenk*),²⁸ and she tried to push his hands away. Another night, I observed a seventeen-year-old unmarried girl talking heatedly with a middle-aged man, the father of a ten-year-old son, whom she called *but* (literally “sister’s husband or brother-in-law”). The third case involved a group of unmarried girls who invited a group of married men, who were fathers, to play or flirt together in a field near the village. During the festival flirting event, the girls constantly called these men “father of *Dand*” or “father of *Zent*.” *Dand* or *Zent* are the first names of men’s eldest son or

²⁸) They did not actually have an actual blood relationship.

daughter. Clearly, the girls were keen on conveying they were not interested in the men as anything more than a momentary flirtation. For these middle aged married men, there would be a momentary flirtation, too, though in the form of post-marital flirtation relationship.

Women who dress in the same way at the institutionalized flirting gatherings may be unmarried or may have been married for a couple of years. When a woman stays at her natal home, her dress is similar to that of any unmarried girl, coiling up her hair, and wearing flowers, jewelry and *ux Diuk* (“Han Chinese clothes” or clothes bought in the downtown market).²⁹ Moreover, like unmarried women, she can freely join in the flirting activities in the evening. In this way, flirting gatherings are open to everyone. The fluid display of women’s dresses can actually cover up the boundary of these two forms of *Hmub* institutionalized flirtation.

Physical Intimacies

To display intimate body contacts openly is very common in the *Hmub* flirting culture. A partner is permitted to put his hands on her shoulders, waists 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 the latter disobey the rules. Moreover, only when girls and boys are together in a group can an individual display intimate physical contact flirtatiously and openly. In other words, if there is only one boy flirting with a group of girls, they can only sit down around the hearth and talk to each other; but if there are two or three boys flirting with five or six more girls, the boys can flirt with the girls nearby. However, the other partners will stop them if their physical contacts go beyond the accepted norms. Inappropriate behavior would indicate that the boys look down upon the other girls present in the same *iut fub* activity.

Intimate physical touches do not necessarily indicate a steady relationship between lovers. Even those who meet for the first time in *iut fub* can display intimate physical contact within the accepted boundaries. I remember the first time I went to watch an inter-village water buffalo fight. At the end of the fighting, I saw groups and pairs of boys and girls singing or exchanging intimate love whispers. Some even held each other’s shoulders and leaned on each other

²⁹ Most of the women with the status of “the old”, from those who have just given birth to her first baby to the old women, wear Miao clothes and a black cloth over their heads rather than colorful jewelry.

closely. At first, I thought they were couples in steady relationships. Later on, some girls told me that the girls and boys who were flirting were mainly from different villages near by and were holding an *iut fub* event after the water buffalo fight. Although they looked intimate, most of them had never met each other before. This might be their first flirtatious encounter. For most of them, their personal names remained unknown. Another example of institutionalized flirting was found in a bridegroom's behavior toward my friend *Ghaif*, a 20 year-old unmarried woman. When *Ghaif* and I were accompanying the bridegroom's group returning to the Fangf Bil village, I observed the bridegroom was holding *Ghaif*'s hand several times in a flirtatious matter. I felt confused when the other boys did not show any response or comment on the groom's "inappropriate behavior" toward *Ghaif*, who was the bride's good friend and a sister (they were classificatory patrilineal parallel cousins).

When we arrived at the Fangf Bil village, the groom and his cousins went to repair their bamboo musical instrument, *gik*. I asked *Ghaif* how could the bridegroom touch her body so openly and flirtatiously? *Ghaif* evidently found my question funny. She laughed and explained to me: "I don't quite like the way he took my hand, either, Sister. However, he is allowed to take or touch my hands or some part of my body (like the shoulder or waist) openly while I am still unmarried. This is very common in our *Hmub* society."

Unlike the "strangeness" of the cross village *iut fub* partners, the male and female participants of the intra-village flirting activities are near or distant affines to each other. The boy may be the "brother-in-law" of the girl, and the girl may be the "sister-in-law" of the boy, or the wife of his nephew. At the girls' get-together flirting activity, you may hear the girl call the boy *but* ("brother-in-law"), *daid nenk* ("maternal uncle, mother's brother"), *bad liut* ("husband's elder brother," prescriptive terminology) or *bad yut* ("husband's younger brother," prescriptive terminology). These kinship terms, which reveal the affinal relationships between people of different generations, are used in conformity with the intimate or flirtatious physical touch in the institutionalized extra-marital flirting.

Diut Hxad Vangt ("Love Song Duet")

Besides flirtatious body contacts or heartfelt night conversations, singing love songs (especially duets) is another common feature of institutionalized flirtation. It can occur in day-to-day and festival flirting settings. Here is an example of a love song duet recorded during my fieldwork. This love song performance happened in the early spring of 1999 in connection with the seasonal festival

for celebrating the planting of rice in the field. Many people, male and female, young and old, from the neighboring four villages, gathered on the hillside fields to watch bullfights hosted by the Fangf Bil villagers with several other villages in the neighboring area. After the bullfights, most of the older men, women and their children left, but the young men and women stayed for the institutionalized dating. Men and women from different villages were sitting or standing close together, happily talking or singing to each other. The love song performances of some very skilled singers had also attracted a large audience.

The two female singers were from the Fangf Bil village, and the two male singers from another village, not very far from Fangf Bil. The people of the two villages spoke the same *Hmub* dialect and wore the same style of *Hmub* clothes. The two male singers, in their forties, were already married and had become fathers. One female singer, in her twenties, was single, while the other, (nearly 25 years old) married with no children, still lived with her natal kin. We knew that the female singers were descendents of the same patrilineal group, but did not know their real genealogical relationships to the male singers. However, during the break and at the end of the song performance, we heard the men and women address each other using prescriptive cross-kin terms. Besides the singers, the audience was consisted of women from the Fangf Bil village, and men from another village. Like the relationships between the male and female singers, the male and female audiences were also classificatory affines. The whole performance took the form of a spontaneous competition among the singers. They had to listen carefully to what their opposite side was singing. If they were careless, they might get lost among the verses and fail to respond correctly. The 400 verses sung by the four singers as a duet lasted for more than an hour. However, the performance was not really serious or formal. The singers talked to each other, or joked with the audience when they had finished their own verses. The audience also talked to each other while they were enjoying the show. They liked to make comments on the performance, comparing the skills of the singers, or discussing the contents of the verses with the other members of the audience. The contents of the verses were more important than the voices. Any singer who did not pay attention to his or her turn to sing, or who did not look for a good verse with which to respond, might be criticized and receive negative comments or be given a bad "name" (reputation) by the audience. The story line of this love song duet is about an encounter between two women and two men who meet each other at an institutional flirting event. On the one hand, the men and women both express the same shy but joyful emotions in attending *iut fub* occasions. On the other

hand, they tease themselves and their partners about the dialectical relationship between marriage and extra-marital flirtation. Finally, they express their own solitary sentiments and lonely emotions. Expanding from the story line, there are four thematic emphases in the song: “marriage,” “*iut fub*,” “two kinds of relationships between marriage and *iut fub*,” and “individual sentiments.” These form the aesthetic and sentimental dimensions of marriage and flirtation for the *Hmub*. In this paper I pay special attention on the singing of love songs which reveals the often entangled relationship between marriage and flirting in *Hmub* society. The love song duets address the autonomous nature of marriage and flirting as well as the reluctance of men and some women to make a total commitment to their marriage. Clearly, many *Hmub* want to engage in some sort of romantic play which serves to validate their own desirability. This intention is not without its problems as it may result in fostering conflicting relationships between individuals and someone else’s spouse. These themes are evident in the following love duet: “People who are thinking of each other come to rest in the middle, my cross cousin. The girls want to sit down and talk with the boys, so they rest in the middle. No matter it is true or not, we will say the boys have wives. If you have wives, boys, then go home to take care of them. No matter it is false or not, we will say the boys have wives. Go home and separate from your wives. Then we two will be willing to accompany both of you.”

In contrast to the previous themes, other love song verses highlight the separation between marriage and flirting. The female singers sing one of the two verses as follows: “The boys are like ‘words.’ The boys and the girls are talking and singing together like ducks playing joyfully in the water. We do not know why we are sitting next to you all the time. We do not know why we are accompanying husbands of others.” While the male singers would sing “The girls are good-looking and speak well, but with two hearts. Like the good field grows millet twice, yearly. One heart accompanies their husbands; another heart accompanies us”. All the verses vividly show the same dialectical relations between marriage and flirting. Using rhetorical strategies to create contrasting and dramatic metaphorical expressions, the verses uncover the hidden, fluid, conflicting, and dialectical features of marriage and institutionalized flirtation, both poetically and symbolically.

Local Comments on Extramarital Flirtation

Interviews (2004) with Fangf Bil women and men about extramarital flirtation found a range of attitudes. Several middle-aged or older women noted that they

were not jealous. An older woman added that, "No, I am not unhappy. I am also glad of his good singing voice during extramarital flirtation. He only goes (flirting) for fun." Perhaps because of being aware of my uncertain attitude toward their answers, these women even sang a *Hmub* folk song to convince me during the interview: "Mom has become old, because she has given birth a baby. Dad under such situation goes out to flirt with another girl. Dad goes to talk about love by himself. Dad's flirting affair is his own business." Like the description of the song, these older women emphasized that husband and wife hardly ever accompany each other out of doors, no matter whether walking to the fields or attending ritual activities. "It's a matter of shame for (married) couples to appear together openly," they emphasized. "If a husband wants to go out (for extramarital flirting) let him go. That's his business," these women said in an amused fashion. These comments are very common among the aged women of this village.

Although not as light-hearted as the older women when talking about extramarital flirting, two younger mothers (30 years old) in this *Hmub* village also said that they would allow their husbands to go out and flirt with girls in the evening until their children begin to go to school (i.e. when the children have grown up and the father will not be expected to flirt with girls freely). I asked them whether they felt heart-broken or angry about their husband's flirting activity in the evening. "No, I am not heart-broken or angry. Even if you feel hurt or angry, you just could not change anything at all. My kids' daddy still keeps going out flirting with another young women alone," one mother said. "Although you may be unhappy, you cannot scold him outside your bedroom. That would cause shame among other villagers if they know that you are unhappy at such a thing," the others emphatically added.

In trying to conform to the collective ideas about extramarital flirtation, there still exist individualized actions or perceptions. One middle-aged man in the village told me how most of the male villagers perceive extramarital flirting in a practical manner: "If you want to go flirting with girls in the night time by talking or singing duets, you go ahead secretly. Do not let your wife know. If she does not know, nothing will happen. If she knew, she might get angry." He also mentioned "some women are 'reasonable,' they don't get mad at this; but some are 'unreasonable,' they do get mad." It seems clearly that there is a double standard for men and women in terms of permissible flirting after marriage. In some of the informants' quotes, it seems very salient, with the focus being on women left behind while men pursue extramarital gratification. Though this paper does not aim to explore the practice of gender bifurcation of the extra-

marital flirtation, we still may wonder about how this practice might relate the tradition of polygyny in the history of the *Hmub* or *Hmong* (e.g. Chindarsi 1976),³⁰ or how it might relate to the role of motherhood.

Discussion

I have described the relations between marriage and flirting and also the practice of extra-marital flirtation both verbally and non-verbally. There are two points that I will elaborate further: First, what the characteristic of the *iut fub* can be explained as an institutionalized extramarital flirting; and second, how the *iut fub* can be depicted as an alternative to functional courtship or courtship with lineal relation to marriage which also sheds light on certain specific features of “courtship,” e.g. the duality of flirting and courting, or the “serious” flirting culture with regards to extramarital as well as non-extramarital relations.

Institutionalized Flirting Zone

In general, *iut fub* in the *Hmub* village has become institutionalized through the ritualized social arrangements of place, time, and the grouping of people. On the one hand, it conforms to the rules for affinal alliance: all girls and boys of the Fangf Bil village who flirt together are *khait* affines towards one another. On the other hand, *iut fub* also creates a juxtaposed, solid, binary structure for the institution of cross-cousin marriage, as well as an image of fluidity when integrating the institutions of marriage, extramarital flirting and duo-local residence. Ultimately, the textual description of duets does not necessary have a lineal relation between marriage and flirting. With the hybrid display of intimately physical contacts among flirting men and women marked with diverse genealogical ties, affinal relations and marital status, this creates fluidity between personal emotions and the social constraints of the institution of marriage. Among the emotions created by *iut fub*, extramarital flirtation is a way of reconciling personal “romantic” and “intimate” encounters with a lifetime of constraint through the institution of prescriptive marriage. In a way, there are two forms of *iut fub* in this flirting zone: one leading to marriage and another leading to validation of the self as a sexual being.

³⁰ Chindarsi, N. *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*. (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1976).

The peculiarity of this zone of the *Hmub* can be highlighted furthermore when compared with other societies. In addition to the literature quoted above, which is divided over the exact nature of the interplay between courtship and marriage, the study of Jane Collier on the Los Olivous in Spain elaborates how market economy, individual intention, and self-management techniques related to the senses and emotional workings of the “modern” individual, plus varying gender conceptions, move a society from one based on courtship to dating, especially as it pertains to the shift between duty to personal desire.³¹ Unlike the Spanish cases, where duties shift with heightened individuality to personal desire, the *Hmub* adopt both. There is duty indeed in the formal processes of flirting and the everyday interaction between adults, especially married couples in public (but not in private). The *Hmub* also have a flirtation zone for continued expression of personal desire within a larger social restraint. How different is this from 19th Qing dynasty (or maybe many other stratified societies) where ordinary men went to brothels, and social elites seek the company of courtesans, all started in the form of entertaining in a public place, but ended with personal gratification when in private. Yet what is unique among the egalitarian *Hmub* is the absence of a stratified society where a very well off class is nonexistent. But the personal zone for intimacy remains important and salient. In this way, the *Hmub* may be a special case for validating the sexual self of a human being, socially as well as psychologically, with the provision of an alternative in theorizing romantic love from the Western social stratifications and heightened individualism.

Duality of Flirting and Courting

However, can the *iut fub* be explained in terms of flirtation culture rather than courtship culture? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines courtship as “the action or process of paying court to a woman with a view to marriage; courting, wooing.” It is also defined as “behavior or action befitting a court or courtier; courtliness of manners,” or “the paying of court or courteous attentions; *esp.* the paying of ceremonial or complimentary acts of courtesy to a dignitary”.³² As such, the meaning of courtship seems to be identical with manners or

³¹ Collier, J., *From Duty to Desire: Remaking Families in a Spanish Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 67–112.

³² Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume III. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989a), p. 1064.

politeness. In contrast flirtation seems considered less serious than courtship. Flirtation is defined as “a quick, sprightly motion, a cant word among women;” and “the action or behavior of a flirt; flighty or giddy behavior, frivolity; the action of playing at courtship”.³³ In reviewing the *Hmub* institutionalized flirting data I will shed light on its seriousness, and argue that the boundary between courtship and flirtation may not be so obvious. For our discussion, I will draw on three other ethnographies with regards to courting and flirting cultures to demonstrate that seriousness is a specific feature commonly seen in other institutional courting and flirting customs, though with diverse levels of seriousness. Long term and formal obligations or institutions create one type of serious courtship and flirtation, while the other is related to premarital sexuality.

The socially constrained *Hmub* flirtation, enhanced with entertaining devices, creates a leisurely and socially playful zone for the community. Similarly, Collier also addressed the conventional courtship of a Spanish village in the 1960s’ as a long, formal institution and a pleasing emotional zone for young persons. In this case, the seriousness of courtship is derived from its formal asexual manners, reputation, and long-term courting activity before marriage.³⁴ There is a vivid description about how the boy was permitted to enter into the girl’s house formally, successfully transforming his interest from informal street courtship, that I would label “flirtation”, to courtship.

The boy, hair plastered and shoes polished, enters the kitchen and accepts a chair. *Suegro* (father-in-law) and *novio* discuss crops or the weather until the girl’s father, uncomfortable in this social situation, retires to the café for some coffee and male companionship. The mother however must sit close by her daughter, *hacienda la cestact* (literally, ‘basket weaving’) while the *novios* ‘pluck the turkey.’ Physical contact is forbidden at any time, and the rule is generally respected.³⁵

Parallel to the long term flirtation of the *Hmub*, the seriousness of the conventional Spanish case was related to its long term premarital courtship. Prior to the 1960’s it was common that courting partners in the Spanish village would marry only after courting more than ten years. Furthermore, sexual desire is carefully separated from romantic or emotional desire during the formal courtship process.

³³ Simpson, J.A. and E.S.C. Weiner, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume V. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989b), p. 1064.

³⁴ Collier, J., *From Duty to Desire*.

³⁵ Collier, J., *From Duty to Desire*, p. 81.

In contrast to the “asexual”, long term post-marital flirtation of the *Hmub* and the serious pre-marital courtship in a Spanish village in the sixties,³⁶ the courtship customs of the *Hmong* in Laos³⁷ and Chinese villages in Northern China are quite different. In both cases courtship allow “pre-marital sexuality,” though with different connotations for each community. In *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, the conventional *Hmong* courtship in Laos is an important part of its culture because marriage is the “natural stage” to becoming true mature adults, and the pleasant counterpoint to a hard working life.³⁸ Regular flirtatiousness could be in public and also as a “secrecy game, with its pleasing air of conspiracy, witness, and excitement”.³⁹ In other words, the *Hmong* courtship is not just an emotional zone for casual emotional enjoyment, but also an arena for engaging in physical enjoyment and experimentation. Donnelly mentioned that, “There is another reason for shyness and desire for privacy. My respondents (except the converted Christian *Hmong*) seem to agree with other sources that *Hmong* girls and boys play sexual games together, and that fidelity to one friend is not expected”.⁴⁰ The *iut fub* of the *Hmub* appears to have captured both the serious, respectful atmosphere of the Spanish and some of the light hearted, experimentation of the *Hmong*. Focusing on love, intimacy, and family change in a Chinese village from 1949 to 1999, Yan Yunxiang gave an interesting alternative example of the relations of courtship and marriage: post-engagement dating and premarital sex. Yan

³⁶ Ideally, sexual relations are not included in the permitted extra-marital long term flirting of the *Hmub* society.

³⁷ “*Hmong* people refer to an Asian ethnic group in the mountainous regions of southern China. There, they remain one of the largest sub-groups in the Miao *minzu*. Beginning in the 18th century, *Hmong* groups began a gradual southward migration due to political unrest and to find more arable land. As a result *Hmong* currently also live in several countries in Southeast Asia, including northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar-Burma. In Laos, a significant number of *Hmong/Mong* people fought against the communist-nationalist Pathet Lao during the Secret War. When the Pathet Lao took over the government in 1975, *Hmong/Mong* people were singled out for retribution, and tens of thousands fled to Thailand for political asylum. Since the late 1970s, thousands of these refugees have resettled in Western countries, including the United States, Australia, France, French Guiana, and Canada. Others have been returned to Laos under United Nations-sponsored repatriation programs. Around 8,000 *Hmong/Mong* refugees remain in Thailand” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hmong_people).

³⁸ Donnelly, N.D., *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).

³⁹ Donnelly, N.D., *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, p. 120.

⁴⁰ Donnelly, N.D., *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, pp. 120-121.

argues that there are two important effects of this custom: first, securing a marriage contact, especially, for the groom's family; second, creating mutual affections and emotional ties between the two. In other words, Yan emphasizes the seriousness of the intent of extra-engagement dating and premarital sex for the rural Chinese, which achieve a twofold goal: the emotional outlet and development of mutual affection for the couple; and the social capital for the bride's and groom's families, positively attained from engagement toward marriage.⁴¹

Either in terms of "courting with emphasis on courtship," or "flirting with emphasis on courtship," I suggest that there are both commonality and diversity to be further highlighted. Firstly, all four cultures display a specific zone as being a pleasing and relaxing emotional zone regardless of courtship as a precursor to marriage (such as in the Spanish or the contemporary rural Chinese villages) or an indirect result (such as flirtation in the subgroup *Hmong* of the Miao in Laos or the subgroup *Hmub* of the Miao in eastern Guizhou). This commonality is especially significant when interpreting how the *Hmub* place their social focus on institutionalized extramarital flirtation. In other words, based on these ethnographies of courtship or flirtation, human beings are psycho-emotional beings, not just social beings.

Additionally, all four cultures define "courting with emphasis on courtship" or "flirting with emphasis on courtship" activity as a serious matter. For the rural Chinese villagers, premarital sexuality is presented as an effective social strategy to solidify the marital contract between the families of the bride and groom. In contrast, the practice of premarital sexuality of the *Hmong* does not necessarily aim for marital exchange, but has significant social implications for an individual's social networks as well as having pleasant psychological and emotional experiences.

Though restricting premarital sexuality, the other two cultures make flirting with emphasis on courtship serious with long term flirtation. The conventional Spanish cases are amazing for the length of courtship, often enduring for 10 or more years, and avoidance of sexual contact with their long term courting partners fulfilling the social obligation of respect for both the girl and their family. The *Hmub*, on the other hand, conduct both short term premarital courtship as well as a long term extra-marital flirtation simultaneously. This paper asserts that the juxtaposition of the long term and short term flirtation

⁴¹ Yan, Y.X., *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy, and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949–1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

is a very *serious* social interaction with important implications for an individual's social network and standing in the *Hmub* society. By means of multiple modes of expression: verbal, physical and use of social conventions and institutionalized behavior, the *iut fub* creates not only an exclusive arena for emotional expression for the young, but also presents itself as an institutionalized flirting zone for the married adults, providing an approach with a result that is different from the lineal relation between flirtation and monogamous marriage. It provides a transitional phase for the young to have role models and gradually assume the responsibilities of mature *Hmub* adults in their social networks and obligations.

Conclusion

Most of the literature quoted describes courtship will lead to marriage, but some do point out that there is no necessary connection or entangled relations between them. These contradictions suggest the complications involved. Is erotic desire or the flirtatious happiness of men and women relevant or irrelevant to marriage? The *iut fub* of the *Hmub* in eastern Guizhou further underscores the entangled relations between flirting and marriage created by the integrated marital institutions, cross cousin marriage and duo-local post-marital residence, the entertaining devices, singing of love songs and intimate physical contact. In general, by analyzing extramarital flirtation of the *Hmub*, I have sought to explore the boundaries of emotional expression, both within and outside marriage of this specific culture. By looking into *iut fub* as an integrated social structure in a dialectical relationship within the institution of marriage, the fluid situations for extramarital flirtations or intimacies can be more closely examined.

Besides documenting erotic encounters outside the institution of marriage, this ethnography of *Hmub* extramarital flirtation suggests that we can pay more attention to the concept of infidelity as it is defined culturally.⁴² In other words, how does an individual in Fangf Bil village respond psychologically and emotionally to institutionalized extramarital eroticism, whether verbal or physical? Do Fangf Bil *Hmub* villagers regard such extramarital erotic happenings as infidelity? Will a young mother feel jealous, angry or sad as a result of the erotic encounters of her middle-aged husband in *Hmub* flirting activities? Such questions may touch on the nature of the distinctions between the three social

⁴² Jankowiak, W., M.D. Nell and A. Buckmaster, "Managing Infidelity: A Cross-Cultural Perspective," *Ethnology*, pp. 85-101.

domains of sex, love and marriage. I suggest that institutionalized extramarital flirtation is a compensation for an overly formal marriage/family arrangement, which may not necessarily result in an aloof relationship, but an intimate one instead. So, the practice of the *Hmub* extramarital flirting is less an escape but rather the establishment of a safe setting where people can satisfy themselves of being sexually attractive. Maybe this desire is stronger than what conventional wisdom should have acknowledged. Whereas the primary reason for the existence of the sex industry in other parts of China is to meet the need of sexual satisfaction which will not go beyond a physical intercourse. The *Hmub* practice is not sexually motivated but just the provision of an arena for sexual validation and that in the end may be an alternative but important encounter that constitutes a person's own emotional gratification. The *Hmub*'s culturally defined conceptions of infidelity would focus on extramarital flirtations, but without ending with sexual intercourse as a result. Through the public display of erotic flirtation, the *Hmub* of eastern Guizhou demonstrate the existence of significant arenas for interpersonal exchanges. Recalling Adam Phillips's suggestion that "flirtation keeps things in play, and by doing so lets us get to know them in different ways,"⁴³ I suggest that the *Hmub*'s extramarital flirtation serves as an outlet for individual, personal expression of deeply held emotions. This stands in sharp contrast to the lack of public emotional expression allowed to married couples.⁴⁴

⁴³ Phillips, A., *On Flirtation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁴⁴ Given that the *Hmong* and the *Hmub* in this paper are branches of Miao, it is necessary to examine if extra-marital flirting exists among the former before undertaking a systematic comparative analysis on the courting and flirting customs of these two subgroups. There are *Hmong* courtship and marriage literatures, e.g. Chindarsi 1976: 67–80, Cooper 1984: 143–145, Cooper 1995, Lee 1998, Lee 2005, and Tapp 2001. Chindarsi, N., *The Religion of the Hmong Njua*, pp. 67–80. Cooper, R., *Resource Scarcity and the Hmong Response* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1984). Cooper, R. *The Hmong* (1995). Lee, G.Y., "Marriage and Residence in a Thai Highland Society." *Journal of Siam Society*. (1988). Lee, G.Y. "The Shaping of Tradition." *Hmong Studies Journal*. (2008). Tapp, N., *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency and the Imaginary* (Leiden: BRILL, 2001).