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Hmong At Heart exhibit

What: Costumes; jewelry; opportunities to weave baskets, prepare a traditional Hmong meal and use an interactive video kiosk

Where: La Habra Children's Museum, 301 S. Euclid St., La Habra

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays, 1 p.m.-5 p.m. Sundays through April 29

Cost: \$6, \$5 for La Habra residents

Information: 562-905-9793

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Web helps keep old language alive



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If you Google the words "language revitalization," you'll come up with more than 1 million entries. If you add "Hmong" to it the result is considerably less.

Still, bucking a global trend, the group originally from southern China is increasingly tapping into the Internet to spread the written form of its native tongue, invented in the late '50s.

I first heard about this from my colleague, Pha Lo, whose family hooked up to the Web in 2006, spurring her father – who had never logged online – to surf Hmong news sites and scroll message boards, connecting to far-flung contacts.

Lo's dad wants to keep alive the language he learned – a text created by Christian missionaries based on the Roman alphabet and sprinkled with phonetics that mirror Hmong tones.

He does this at a time when globalization vastly reduces the need for linguistic diversity, when people continent to continent choose just the popular languages to conduct business, says his daughter, who works at New America Media, a coalition of ethnic media.

"This is a small diaspora community trying to leverage what it knows and what it values," says K.

David Harrison, author of "When Languages Die" from Oxford University Press. "What you see here are immigrants, like other immigrants before them, witnessing their children going to school and not answering them back in the same language; witnessing grandparents and grandkids not being able to communicate, then worrying how to pass on cultural ideals if youngsters become monolingual."

Perhaps with some irony, they learn something old with something high-tech while pushing for community language lessons and sharing tips to save tradition.

Long before the written Hmong language came to life, Lo's countrymen used oral history or documented the past through bright, hand-stitched story cloths known as *paj ntaub*, the same cloths I have received as gifts since I was a child.

Looking at them, I was drawn into a world of farming, feeding animals and going to market. Instead of playing with dolls during my childhood, I indulged my imagination, assigning plots and names to the faces looking at me from the cotton tapestry, illustrating the relocation of kin to neighboring nations.

The Hmong, now spread among at least seven countries, once served as allies of the United States. Many of the men signed up for the CIA's secret army in Laos during the Vietnam War. When the battles ended and U.S. troops went home, scores of them – fearing persecution from a new communist government – escaped with their clans to places such as Thailand, later moving on to the West. They are now the second-largest Southeast Asian population in the U.S., according to the book "Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land."

With resettlement comes changes. "Small languages are abandoned for big languages," Harrison says. "American society is not typical, unlike European society where many citizens are bilingual. Even in California you see the multitude of native languages – more than 100 of them – that were spoken before English that are now almost all extinct."

As an assistant professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College, he understands why the Hmong insist on creating virtual communities to link a scattered people. Within ethnicities, there are always things and ideas that can't translate. One example: the honorific terms that many Asians assign to one another indicating seniority in a family, extended family or larger group.

In English, we can express how someone is an older brother or the oldest uncle, but in many Asian tongues, there are specific words. When you lose such words and customs, there is an "erosion of knowledge," Harrison says. "Sometimes it's not transferable. It's attached to just that language."

Which brings me back to the Los and the story cloths.

Ten years ago, Lo's relatives in Southeast Asia would send these crafts to California as a way of communicating, also asking that the items be sold. But, as Lo recalled, "We kept the products, knowing they would not sell." Instead they mailed back money orders as gifts.

These days there's e-mail. Hmong people in distant corners of the globe, posting on sites such as www.zoosiab.com, stay in touch, thriving with instant messaging.

This column on Asian cultures and communities appears twice a month in the local news section. Please contact Do at: nvdailynews@gmail.com.