

WHAT IS A GOOD GIRL?
THE EVOLUTION OF FEMININE IDENTITY IN THE AMERICAN HMONG
COMMUNITY

A Thesis

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Abstract
of
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Traditional Hmong culture was a patriarchal society with marriages arranged by male clan elders. The Hmong were recruited by the CIA to assist in the Vietnam War and later fled to Thailand. American education and notions of western culture were introduced in the Thai camps. Hmong marriage rituals changed after resettlement in the United States. Through exposure to education and American culture, women challenged old world traditions and opted to delay marriage and children in favor of education.

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Introduction

Gao Nou came to the United States from a Thai refugee camp at five years old and was raised under the strict regulations of being a good Hmong girl. Like her mother and grandmother, she was expected to clean the house, prepare meals, and make like as comfortable as possible for the men in her family. In addition to her duties at home, she attended high school, college, and, later, worked in a high-paying job. Gao Nou lived in two conflicting worlds: her traditional Hmong upbringing and in modern American society. Her Hmong husband, Ger, clung to tradition and criticized her for mistakes he attributed to her being a bad Hmong wife, and he began to beat her. When she disclosed to her mother-in-law that her husband beat her, Gao Nou was shocked when her mother-in-law replied, “Ger’s father has beaten me black and blue for the last thirty years, but I never left him because I am a good Hmong woman. One time he kicked so hard, like they do in the kung-fu movies, that his footprint was on my belly for a month, but I never left him because I am a good wife and mother, just bear with it and stomach the pain. You’ll get used to it as I did.”¹ That day Gao left her husband and filed for divorce, and became what the Hmong community regarded as a bad Hmong girl. She objected to domestic physical abuse and feared that if she stayed with Ger and had children they would also suffer the same abuses. Ger’s mother’s judgmental advice suggested that she genuinely

¹ Vincent K. Her and Mary Louise Buley-Meissner, eds. *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 106-108.

believed that Gao Nou was better off staying in an abusive marriage, as remaining subservient would have kept her status as a good Hmong girl. A good Hmong girl knew her place and accepted her circumstances, obeyed her husband, and did not question his actions or decisions.²

Mai Xoing married at sixteen as a high school freshman in a marriage arranged by male clan elders. She bore two children by age nineteen but continued high school and finished college. As a good Hmong girl and good daughter-in-law, she was expected to do all the housework and prepare all the meals for her husband and his family. The evening meal took several hours as men always ate first, then she had to clean up before the women ate what remained. In traditional Hmong homes, men always ate first before women. Because of this, Mai usually did not finish her domestic obligations until ten o'clock at night and worked for several more hours to keep up with schoolwork. Her mother-in-law tried to help alleviate the household chores, but did not understand why Mai wanted to continue her education. Her mother-in-law warned her, "girls are not suppose to keep going to school after they finish high school. They should just go and work and help support their family because money is very important right now." Both Gao Nou and Mai Xiong received pressure from both men and women in their families to fulfill their established roles as women. Hmong patriarchal tradition suppressed women's power to object, while some older and more traditional Hmong women tried to quell domestic issues with passivity.³

² Her and Buley-Meissner, 106-108.

³ Lillian Faderman and Ghia Xiong, eds. *I Begin My Life All Over* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 150-152.

In America in the 1980s, Gao Nou and Mia Xiong challenged long established Hmong marriage and gender roles. Both grew up in the United States and experienced the abundant educational opportunities offered to them. Although they both married and tried to maintain the role of a traditional Hmong good girl, their exposure to American culture enabled them to object to domestic abuse and limits on their education. This thesis examines Hmong cultural traditions at the time of arrival, the transplantation of those traditions to the United States, and the lives of some Hmong who challenged them. At the heart of all the changes are advances made possible by education. Hmong women experienced the greatest changes and advances in opportunities as it was rare for a Hmong girl to receive an education in Laos.

The Hmong were just one of many groups of Asian immigrants who came to the United States in last quarter of the twentieth century. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the quota of national origins and allowed for 20,000 immigrants from Eastern Hemisphere countries per year; exempt from these limits were those who had family members already living in the United States, who would be admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, and this category of exemption included refugees. Since the Asian population in the United States in 1965 was only one-half of one percent, or less than 1,000,000 people, lawmakers assumed this would lead to an increase in European immigration, not Asian. The opposite was true, the numbers of European immigrants remained well below 900,000 per year, while Asian immigration skyrocketed from countries that previously had no representation in the United States, particularly South Asia and Southeast Asia. By 1985, the population of Asian Americans soared to more

than 5,000,000. Although the Hmong were rural, agrarian people, many Asian immigrants were skilled professionals from large cities; as a whole, Asians were the most highly skilled immigrant group to ever enter the United States. Many Asians, specifically Chinese, came to the United States seeing advanced degrees in high demand fields like science and engineering. Filipino immigrants of the 1970s came in search of work as at home, even the most educated of people had trouble finding a job that paid enough to support a family. Most Hmong came to the United States prior to receiving educations, but once resettled, they took advantage of the educational opportunities available.⁴

Changes in the American economy during the later part of the twentieth century led to increased employment opportunities for women. Although typically low-paying, the fields of health care, domestic work, and light manufacturing offered many women jobs that conflicted with old-world gender ideals. Not all work was low paying, but many men had difficulty accepting low paying work, or jobs they were over qualified for, as they possessed college degrees from their homeland. Many women took jobs they were over qualified for to secure a visa for their families and oftentimes gender roles reversed once in the United States; the husbands became the caregiver at home while the wife became the breadwinner. Because of education and employment opportunities, the Hmong also experienced these same shifts in gender roles.⁵

⁴ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 419-432; Reed Ueda, *Postwar Immigrant America: A Social History* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. martin's Press, 1994), 65.

⁵ David A. Gerber, *American Immigration: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 86-99.

A change in gender roles was a common result of migration. Class, ethnicity, and time of migration were all factors that formed the immigration experiences and altered gender roles. For most immigrant women, American culture changed what it meant to be a woman within one's traditional culture, but more importantly, the traditions and cultures immigrant women brought to the United States altered American ideals of what it meant to be a woman. The cultivation of the individual self resulted from migration; this represented a profound change as many immigrant women came from areas suffering from economic inequality, communism, and colonialism. Once in the United States, some men took over child rearing and household duties, while their wives worked outside of the home. Many immigrant women made financial decisions with their husbands, and in some cases, took over management of the family's finances all together. These changed gender roles left some women feeling conflicted, as they straddled traditional culture at home, and American culture at school and in the workplace. The experiences of Hmong women depicted in this thesis are not unlike those of the multitude of other groups of women who immigrated to the United States.⁶

The four chapters of this thesis analyze the Hmong over a great span of time and through several geographic locations, with emphasis on migration to the United States and the experiences of first and second-generation immigrants. Chapter One begins in Siberia and then examines their time in China, and analyzes the multitude of diverse aspects of Chinese culture and traditions that the Hmong adopted and blended with their

⁶ Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, & Immigrant Life in the U.S. 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xi-xiii, 72-76.

own. Chapter Two uncovers their relationship with the CIA during the Vietnam War in Laos. Their subsequent experiences in Thai refugee camps introduced western gender norms through education that challenged centuries-old standards of relations between men and women. Chapter Three considers how western culture and education challenged traditional marriage customs brought from the Hmong homeland in Laos and what they became in the United States. Chapter Four evaluates how the definition of a good Hmong girl changed in the United States as western education and American culture permeated multiple generations of Hmong families. This thesis argues that the changes in Hmong marriage tradition and gender roles directly resulted from exposure to higher levels of western education, first in Thai camps, and later, after resettlement in the United States.

Living a Hmong the Others:
The Cultural Revolution of the Hmong from the Siberian Steppe
to Southeast Asia

Hmong history is rooted in a quest for independence, cultural distinction, and solidarity. Origination folk stories told of a beginning in Siberia nearly five thousand years ago. As early as 2700 BCE, the Hmong traversed south through Mongolia and into Northern China towards a milder climate. Through their travels, they selected attributes of those they encountered and incorporated some of those within their unique cultural practices. The migratory patterns of the Hmong allowed for freedom from outside rule and the evolution of a rich, vibrant, and dynamic culture. The stories of the Hmong, their origin and survival, were preserved through oral histories. The Hmong endured horrific violence in China as they refused to assimilate, and fled further south to the mountains of Northern Laos in the early eighteenth century. They later faced near extinction under Communist rule in Laos in the 1970s after assisting the United States in the Vietnam War. To survive, they fled to refugee camps in Northern Thailand and eventually, many resettled in the United States. Through these experiences, the Hmong strengthened their sense of independence and solidarity. The ability to remain unified and culturally distinct through centuries of warfare, attempted forced assimilation, and years in refugee camps, the Hmong continued to survive. Their next stop, the United States, provided new grounds for reshaping and growing their community. The long tradition of oral history,

clear sense of self-identity, and refusal to assimilate allowed the Hmong to thrive through all adversity.⁷

Legends of Origin

Many Hmong folk tales recount a beginning into a cold and dark world. Geographically, these stories offer clues as to the first origins of the Hmong. One story tells of a place so cold it snowed all year. Other stories tell of a place being dark half the year and then light for half the year. These places were so harsh, the Hmong left and eventually made their way to Mongolia.⁸ It is through these folk tales that the possible origins of the Hmong were traced to Siberia.

Hmong folk tales, passed down orally for thousands of years, tell of the world beginning with a single man and woman. The first couple, Lou Tou and See Chee, emerged out of a mountain into total darkness. Without a sun or moon, the sky hung so low Lou Tou touched it. Lou Tou and See Chee had many sons and needed to make the world bigger. The eldest son, Teng Chu, and his father pushed up the sky then stretched it out to make the world larger. They made a gold lamp for the sun and a silver lamp for the moon. They hung them in the sky where they remain today.⁹

⁷ Anne Jagodzinski and James Kegel, eds., *The Hmong and Their Stories D. C. Everest Area Schools: A Community Project* (Weston: D. C. Everest Schol Publications, 2001), 6-7; Yer J. Thao, *The Mong Oral Tradition: Cultural Memory in the Absence of Written Language* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006), 11-13; Patricia Moore-Howard, *The Hmong: Yesterday and Today* (Lansing: Museum of Michigan State University, 1982), 1-2; <https://keepinitrealevanston.wordpress.com/author/keepinitrealevanston/page/47/#jp-carousel-560>. Accessed March 25, 2012.

⁸ Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 88-89.

⁹ Charles Johnson, *The Beginning of the World: The Sun and the Moon* (St. Paul: Macalester College, 1981), 5-16.

Hmong means “free people” and although the ethnics group’s origins are not fully understood, their migration routes and sojourns represent a resistance to domination in attempts to maintain their cultural, spiritual, and tribal freedoms.¹⁰ The first people to settle in Siberia came from Eurasia more than seven thousand years ago. The theory of a Hmong Siberian origin was widely accepted among western and Hmong scholars and complements the tales of long periods of darkness followed by long periods of light. Siberian Shamanism originated as an indigenous practice in India and is similar to the form of Shamanism practiced by the Hmong today. It focused on supernatural powers, charms and herbs to treat disease, and the use of magic figures.¹¹ Shamanism is an example of an attribute adopted by the Hmong of peoples they encountered. It was likely that the Hmong were related to the mostly Caucasian Siberian people. From around 5000 to 3000 BCE, the last glacial period peaked and temperatures rose, allowing for further southern migration. Southern and central Siberians migrated south to the borders of Mongolia and these areas became predominantly Caucasian populations. By the year 2000 BCE the Hmong migrated even further south in search of a warmer climate and established large populations in China.¹² Hmong believe they lived in Mongolia prior to China, as the first syllable of the word Hmong is also the first syllable in the name Mongolia.¹³

¹⁰ Virginia White, *Pa Nda: The Needlework of the Hmong* (Cheney: Cheney Free Press, 1982), 2.

¹¹ Berthold Laufer, “Origin of the Word Shaman,” *American Anthropologist* Vol. 19 no. 3 (July-September 1917): 361-371. Accessed March 24, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/660223>.

¹² Keith Quincy, *Hmong: History of a People* (Cheney: Eastern Washington University Press, 1995), 29.

¹³ Mote, 90; Thao, 11-13.

The monosyllabic and tonal language spoken by the Hmong also offers clues as to their geographic origins. Father F. M. Savina, a Catholic missionary who worked with the Hmong in China in the early twentieth century, mastered the Hmong language and created a simple Romanized script modeled after the Vietnamese Romanized script created by French missionaries. The ability to preserve in written form the multitude of stories of the Hmong in their native language contributed to the preservation of both language and culture. This became especially important once Hmong relocated to western countries in the 1970s. Unfortunately, many older generation Hmong living in the west today are still illiterate, in both English and Hmong.

Additionally, the written form of Hmong language allowed for scholarly studies on the language's origin.¹⁴ Savina created the first script in modern times, but Hmong folk tales recall a written language destroyed by the Chinese after failed forced assimilation attempts two thousand years ago.¹⁵ The Hmong attempted to retain their original written language by secretly incorporating it into woven embroidery on textiles. Unfortunately, as the Hmong migrated and dispersed throughout China and later into Southeast Asia, the memory of the written language eventually dissolved. Although the written language vanished, the establishment of embroidery as an integral part of Hmong culture and story telling firmly established itself.¹⁶ Hmong embroidery and the stories they depicted helped preserve many legends and tales that would otherwise have been

¹⁴ Quincy, 20.

¹⁵ Moore-Howard, 6.

¹⁶ Jagodzinski and Kegel, eds., 8; Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War in Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

lost. Younger Hmong living in the west use the stories on the cloths to keep themselves connected to their cultural heritage. Older Hmong use these story cloths to tell younger generations about their history. The Hmong language is part of the Miao-Yao family. It may be related to three other “Miao” languages in China, the Hmau, Hmu, and Gho Xiong, but today the differences are so great that none of these groups would be able to understand each other. Additional attempts to establish a connection between Sino-Tibetan and Tai-Kadai languages have never successfully been proven.¹⁷ The Hmong language is unmistakable and unique, with eight different tones and reflecting thousands of years of resistance to outside domination. The Hmong language symbolized their separate, solid, and imperishable identity that is resilient as it is still spoken widely among multiple generations of Hmong today. The distinct language spoken by the Hmong exemplified their independence and resistance to assimilation.¹⁸

Through the Dynasties in China

The Hmong entered China from the north more than two thousand years ago. The Han Chinese regarded them as outsiders and classified them as “Miao,” a derogatory term meaning uncultured barbarians. The Hmong resented and rejected this definition. The term “Miao” is seen in Chinese texts dating to 2300-200 BCE. Although the Chinese kept impeccable written records, they used the term “Miao” to describe all ethnic groups they deemed uncivilized; the Chinese considered all unassimilated ethnic groups to be uncivilized. In some cases, a lack of clarity existed as to whom exactly the Chinese were

¹⁷ Nicholas Tapp, *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency, and the Imaginary* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9.

¹⁸ Mote, 90-91; Nicholas Tapp, Jean Michaud, Christian Culas, and Gary Yia Lee, eds. *Hmong/Miao in Asia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2004), 64.

referring to, as any group who rejected assimilation was considered uncivilized. The Hmong were not explicitly identified until the nineteenth century. Historians identified certain incidents that are most likely referring the Hmong, based on corroborating records from a multitude of sources. Throughout their time in China the Hmong battled to retain autonomy and resisted Chinese pressures to change their language, dress, and culture. Although resistant to full Chinese assimilation, the Hmong adopted many Chinese attributes into their own cultural practices when they deemed significant and complementary to their existing culture. The adaptation of embroidery enabled the Hmong to sustain their cultural identity through many adverse conditions. Their migrations from China to Southeast Asia and later in refugee camps, embroidery provided an outlet for cultural expression and more importantly, retention. Hmong adopted Chinese surnames, a patrilineal male-dominated-society, and the carrying of baskets on their backs. Like Chinese women, Hmong women in Laos stepped aside for a man to pass when walking. Additionally, the religious practices of the Hmong have many similarities to Chinese Daoism.¹⁹

Official Chinese records show ancient general Xuan Yuan drove the Hmong from northern to southern China near the Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan provinces by 1800 BCE. They migrated down the Yellow River and built fortified villages and practiced the same agriculture and herding as they had on the Siberian steppe. In this new territory they incorporated the Chinese style of slash-and-burn agriculture, learned how to raise hogs, and built thatched-roofed houses with indoor fireplaces that better suited the climate.

¹⁹ Tapp, 9, 12-13, 66; Mote, 63.

They also developed a sophisticated legal system that distinguished them from other slash-and-burn ethnic groups in Asia. Legal issues were dealt with on a local level, with most decisions made by male elders in the village. No one person held power over all of the Hmong.

Under the Shang dynasty (1600-1028 BCE), the first historically confirmed dynasty in China, the Hmong endured continuous warfare. This served as an example of Hmong resiliency against assimilation and outside rule. They fought with the Shang, and with many of their other neighbors. The Shang forced them to abandon the agricultural practices they learned in China and live as feudal peasants under the eight-family system. The eight-family system featured a settlement with a well in the center surrounded by a grid of eight farms. The relocation of the Hmong into the eight-family system coincided with Shang flood control plans of the Yellow River. Some speculate that by the close of the 12th c. BCE many Hmong fled, as they refused to be ruled by others, and scattered throughout southern China along other parts of the Yellow River and further south along the Yangtze River.²⁰

The Chou dynasty (1028-257 BCE) conquered the Shang, as they were weak from continuous warfare with tribal groups, and established friendly relations with the Hmong. During the Chou dynasty, the Hmong educated their elite with Chinese characters, adopted Chinese rituals, including Daoism, and established alliances through marriage with Chinese. King Wu, the Chou's first king, requested help from the Hmong in fully dominating the Shang. Many Hmong promptly offered support as they had been treated

²⁰ Mote, 92-95; Quincy, 40; Moore-Howard, 5; Tapp, 66.

so poorly under the Shang. After the Chou completely defeated the Shang, they betrayed the Hmong and expelled them to Kansu, a southern mountain region occupied by other groups. Several aggressive groups already occupied the territory assigned to the Hmong; one warrior in particular known as “White Wolf” terrorized all who entered into his territory. The Chou thought sending the Hmong to this violent region would lead to their eventual elimination. The Hmong refused to rely on the rations provided and migrated away from the garrisons to more remote mountainous lands. The Chou feared they could not control the Hmong if they were so far out of reach and would support other outsider groups and contribute to large-scale revolts. In a failed attempt to gain control over the Hmong, the Chou offered them prime agricultural lands near the garrisons. The Hmong rejected this ploy and stayed in their mountain villages and continued to enjoy autonomy and freedom. The Chou relentlessly attacked the Hmong throughout their reign. In 826 BCE Chou General Fang-chou waged an attack on the Hmong with 300,000 men and 300 war chariots. The Hmong faced near eradication. In fear of their lives, the Hmong dispersed in all directions; many fled east to the ocean and sailed to the South Seas, some fled further south into Szechwan highlands, but many were annihilated.²¹

The Ch’in dynasty (256-207 BCE) followed the Chou and enacted extreme feudal militarization with intentions of unifying all of China. Construction of the Great Wall began to keep those considered barbarians, like the Hmong, out of China. The Ch’in effectively pacified northern China and this enabled the Han (206 BCE-220 CE) to focus on controlling the south. Han territory reached as far as northern Vietnam and the Han

²¹ Mote, 94-96; Quincy, 40-42.

considered this border as defining the civilized from the barbarians. Han General Liu-Shang unsuccessfully attempted to suppress a Hmong rebellion in southern Hunan province. He naïvely approached the Hmong and assumed his victory would come easily. The Hmong were prepared for attack and most of the Han troops were never seen or heard from again. The Hmong also defeated Lui-Shang's replacement, Ma-yuan, along with 20,000 of his troops as they chased them into a mountain gorge where they died from battle wounds and disease. This is a testament to the strength and organization of the Hmong military forces. General Tou-chang followed and embarked on a killing spree of unarmed Hmong villagers that included burning entire villages to the ground and taking anything of value. This continued for three years until Han emperor Liu Hsiu determined the territory completely placated.²²

The Hmong living in China under Han rule continued to experience grave challenges and further abuses. The Han resented that the Hmong settled in some of the best farming and pastoral lands. The Han population grew to such great numbers that they easily dominated the Hmong. Under the Han Chinese, the Hmong were classified into two distinct groups: raw and cooked. This segregated those who accepted and assimilated with the Chinese and those who did not. Han considered raw Hmong as the unassimilated barbarians who lived outside the reaches of their authority. Raw Hmong paid no taxes, skirted Chinese political control, and lived in remote mountain villages. Because of their remote locale they also failed to contribute to labor forces. Chinese considered cooked Hmong to be those living directly under their control and authority.

²² Quincy, 42-43.

They lived near Han communities and assimilated to an acceptable level of Chinese culture, paid taxes, and provided labor services. These two terms, raw and cooked, provide insight as to how the Chinese, particularly Han, regarded outsiders. A group was assimilated and accepted Chinese ways or they had not; no distinction other than insider and outsider existed. Historian Robert D. Jenks explains that the Han Chinese generally regarded unassimilated Hmong as “barbaric, lazy, violent, and cunning, but tended to be more indulgent and kindly disposed towards them if they adopted Chinese customs.”²³

Although all Hmong had adopted many aspects of Chinese culture, they avoided full assimilation as exemplified by their decision to live in remote mountain settlements. Opting to reject full assimilation was the cornerstone of the Hmong’s independent identity. This is evident throughout their time in China, later in Southeast Asia, and even more so after they resettled in the United States. They adopted aspects of cultures they wanted and found useful, but did not replace existing customs with new ones. They retained their own Hmong identity. In contrast to the Chinese claims of the raw Hmong, western Christian missionaries who encountered Hmong in China found them to be pleasant, kind, and welcoming. Han Chinese generally regarded themselves as superior to all minority groups, not just unassimilated Hmong. Even under immense pressure from the Chinese, the Hmong refused to assimilate. Other groups who refused assimilation fared worse than the Hmong; many were fully exterminated. Unassimilated minority groups found it safer, and easier, to remain as isolated as possible well into the twentieth

²³ Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and Social Disorder in Guizhou: The “Miao” Rebellion 1854-1873* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 35.

century. Remote life also allowed for the avoidance of negative social situations where Hmong received ridicule for their cultural practices and violent attacks.²⁴ The remote locations of their villages made it difficult for the Chinese to find them, and the Chinese also feared they would fall victim to Hmong magic or poisoning if they entered a Hmong village. In some ways the Chinese were afraid of the Hmong. Although they had adopted many Chinese customs, their indigenous Shamanistic practices scared the Chinese. Cooked Hmong living amongst the Chinese still held loyalties to raw Hmong. They worked as double agents and informed raw Hmong if the Chinese planned on attacking their villages. Raw Hmong felt some resentment towards the cooked Hmong for assimilating and adopting Han Chinese attributes, but it is because of the cooked Hmong and their Chinese connections that the Hmong retained so many aspects of their cultural and spiritual identity.²⁵ The loyalties between the raw and cooked Hmong protected each group, and 400 years of Han rule did not break the Hmong.

From the end of the Han dynasty in the third century CE, there is virtually no mention of the Hmong in Chinese history for four hundred years. Non-assimilated Hmong were banished in the early third century to the Sanwei province by Emperor Shun.²⁶ Whatever the reason for their absence in Chinese history, the Hmong continued to live and thrive in China during that time.

²⁴ Jenks, 35, 45-47; Quincy, 17; Ya Po Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc.), 11.

²⁵ Cha, 11; Tapp, 16; Jenks, 45.

²⁶ Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke, 2000), 37-38.

Hmong Kingdom

The survival of the Hmong under Han rule led to the formation of the first and only Hmong Kingdom (400-900 CE). The kingdom spread from south of the Yellow River to the present day China-Vietnam border. The Hmong had a king, though he lacked full monarchical power, as giving one individual sole power contradicted the independent nature of the Hmong. The king served as figurehead and as a symbol of Hmong independence. As a male-dominated, polygamous society, the king had many wives who bore him many children, and all of his sons were eligible to replace him. Upon his death, the males of the village decided by popular vote which of his sons would succeed him.

The Hmong kingdom had formal districts with twenty villages in each district. Men elected a chief who made most major decisions in each village. Much like a modern democracy, a chief was removed if the villagers deemed him ineffective. The village chief appointed a headman and this served as a symbol of his ability to rule. If, however, the villagers were dissatisfied with the headman, he was removed and replaced. Hmong villages also held public assemblies. Discussions on infrastructure and farming were held and all male elders voted. The power within the villages at the local level kept the kings power severely limited, but the ability of the village to make its most important decisions from within strengthened the structure of the village and the Hmong Kingdom.²⁷ The ability of independent men in a village to make important decisions within the community still holds a place within Hmong society today and many matters are still

²⁷ Quincy, 44; Mote, 98.

treated internally, such as deciding the punishment for a crime committed within a Hmong community.²⁸

The Hmong kingdom peaked during the sixth century and held itself together for three hundred more years, but eventually crumbled along with the fall of China. Though the Hmong Kingdom ceased to exist, Hmong people continued to thrive. Several factors contributed to the demise of the Hmong kingdom, specifically, failure of the Chinese economic and political systems and foreign invaders. As a kingdom within the confines of China, the Chinese economy and political system affected the Hmong. The Chinese economy collapsed in the sixth century when competing factions, vying for control, weakened the central government, and took the Hmong kingdom down with it. Coins minted in copper became scarce and the economy shifted into a barter system. Chinese politics collapsed following the economic crisis. The once-mighty strong central government evaporated and independent warlords fought for control. Warlord Sima Yan and his troops slaughtered entire armies and then melted down their weapons to mint new coins. Shortly after the Chinese economic and political structures collapsed, Mongolian nomads came from the north and seized territories while Tibetan warriors entered from the southwest. The Hmong kingdom spanned over more than three provinces, so new dynasties and militaries appointed Hmong leaders into positions of power in hopes of

²⁸ Robert Montemayor, "A Man for all His People: Chief of Lao-Hmongs Overwhelmed by Duty," *Los Angeles Times*, November 30, 1980, accessed October 30, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/162973800/49F794F7B77D4C3DPQ/1?accountid=10358>.

creating new alliances to suppress the opposing dynasties. The Hmong enjoyed many political privileges under the new competing dynasties.

Oppression Under Later Chinese Dynasties

The T'ang dynasty (618-907) gained significant control of China in the seventh century. This signified the beginning of the end for the Hmong kingdom. The new T'ang government wanted to acquire all lands held by the Hmong and succeeded in seizing control of most of them, but left the villagers in charge of local issues. They established a tax due to the empire, but this left the villages with the illusion of their freedom. However, the T'ang intended on eventual full assimilation of every Hmong. Although there is no direct mention of the Hmong in Chinese texts during the T'ang dynasty, evidence in Chinese documents suggests that the Hmong Kingdom met its demise under the T'ang.

The Hmong reemerge in Chinese texts in the Song dynasty (960-1279). By the turn of the eleventh century, the Song had overwhelmed and nearly eliminated all the Hmong military forces. A key agenda of the Song and General Ty Ching was to eliminate all ethnic minority groups from China. In 907, the Hmong king and his few remaining generals were executed, and the Hmong kingdom and its golden age ended. The first mention of Hmong "tribes" follows the defeat of the Hmong kingdom. The Chinese created and divided Hmong into five different tribes as a way to weaken their central identity and strength. They hoped that by dividing the Hmong into five separate groups they would have difficulty uniting and rebelling against the Chinese. The Chinese created five groups that remain today; White, Black, Flowery, Red, and Blue. The tribes created

were not the same Hmong clans that were deeply integrated into Hmong society. The origin of the clan is not known, but the creation of the tribes caused the clan affiliation to become even more important. The Chinese failed in their attempts to assimilate and dominate all Hmong in China. These violent attempts to eliminate the Hmong may have been the catalyst for the first Hmong to leave China and move south in search of a more peaceful place to live. Those who stayed migrated deep into the mountains to escape further persecution.²⁹

The Hmong were consistently in Chinese records throughout the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). They lived in relative peace and although the first Ming emperor collected a small tax from the Hmong, they were primarily allowed to live without interference. But when subsequent emperors wanted heavier taxation and more control over the Hmong, they feared oppression and saw forced assimilation as inevitable. By 1400, men of all ages abandoned their agricultural obligations and left their villages to rebel against the Chinese. The Hmong won many battles, and the emperor viewed them as a viable threat to China. They continued to rebel for nearly two centuries, and not one year on record lacks mention of a Hmong rebellion. Eventually the Ming emperor deployed nearly 60,000 troops and overwhelmed the Hmong. More than 40,000 Hmong were killed or taken prisoner. Those who survived had to choose sides in order to survive. The Chinese killed all local village leaders and occupied the villages and ruled over the women and children. Few Hmong men remained in the villages as they had left to fight. The

²⁹ Quincy, 44-50; Mote, 98-99; Tapp, Michaud, Culas, and Lee, eds., 64.

remaining Hmong villages now lived under harsh Chinese rule, were forced to assimilate, and experienced hardships as retribution for the rebellion against the Ming.

Following the Ming suppression of the Hmong, in 1622 the Chinese constructed a “Hmong Wall,” similar to the Great Wall, but much smaller. At nearly fifteen feet high and one hundred miles long, the Hmong Wall restricted all their movements. The wall had military posts at frequent intervals and prohibited trade with Chinese villages. The construction of the wall symbolized how much of a threat the Hmong posed to the Ming. Again, the Chinese used force to control those they perceived as a threat. The Ming suppressed the Hmong until the Manchu’s overthrew them in 1644.³⁰

The Manchu dynasty (1644-1911) dissolved the Ming policy of forced assimilation of the Hmong, as the first emperor felt sympathetic towards his citizens. The Hmong returned to living independently and practiced their own rituals and shamanism. They paid the Manchus a small tax and made local decisions that suited their needs. Over time the Manchurian government had too few officers situated in the provinces, and the government lost control to local officials who saw the weaknesses of the central government. The local officials became more like warlords and took advantage of opportunities for land acquisitions and financial gains. The government had nearly no control over any outlying provinces. The Manchu dynasty seemed promising for the Hmong, but ultimately they fared worse than they had under any previous Chinese dynasty after heavy taxes were levied that led to land seizures and crop liens. Implementation of strict laws punished entire families if one member broke a law. High

³⁰ Cha, 10-12; Quincy, 52; Thao, 12-13.

interest rates, five percent per month, also made remaining in China difficult. They left China for Southeast Asia under Manchu rule; a small group left in the 1730s and more in the 1740s, settling just over the border from China in northern Vietnam. In 1790, 6,000 more Hmong left for northern Vietnam, and settled in the fertile mountains. This signified the beginning of what would become a large-scale exodus in the late nineteenth century.³¹

Wu Sangui, a Chinese military leader, and his grandson Wu Shih-fan, introduced the Hmong to modern weaponry. A group of Wu Shin-fan's troops led by General Ma Bao came through a Hmong village seeking refuge from Manchu warriors. The Hmong took the men in and gave them food and shelter. As a gesture of their gratitude, the soldiers showed the Hmong their rifles and taught them how to manufacture their own weapons. They also showed them their armor and cannons. During this time the Hmong developed the infamous Hmong Blunderbuss, a flintlock rifle that continued to be used throughout Southeast Asia well into the twentieth century. Prior to the introduction of rifles by Ma Bao and his men in the late seventeenth century, the Hmong used only crossbows, spears, and knives. Although their weapons could not compete with guns and cannons, the Hmong were feared for their poison arrows. A single hit by a Hmong arrow guaranteed one's death. The Manchu had feared the Hmong arrows, and now that they had rifles and cannons they believed they had to take control of the Hmong before they gained too much power.

³¹ Cha, 12-13; Quincy, 60.

Manchu officials began occupying Hmong villages near the end of the seventeenth century and took fertile lands from the Hmong or forced them to pay heavy taxes to stay on their lands. Officials divided Hmong families into smaller groups of ten to twelve. If one Hmong broke a Chinese law, the whole group received punishment. If a Hmong killed a Chinese official, the entire group received a death sentence. Many Hmong villages occupied lands so remote that Chinese had never set foot in the villages until the Manchu dynasty. The emperor placed an order of genocide on all ethnic groups who opposed Chinese rule. The Hmong were just one of dozens of groups targeted; other minority ethnic groups were completely eliminated. By 1737, more than 30,000 Hmong had been murdered at the hands of Manchu officials. The Manchu seized more than 50,000 rifles manufactured in the fifty years since Ma Bao had passed through. Following the massacre of the Hmong at the hands of the Manchu, more Hmong fled China for Laos and Vietnam.

Twelve thousand Hmong villages survived the massacre and remained in China under Manchu rule, but lost their lands and had no choice but to become sharecroppers and pay heavy taxes on their crops. The Manchu also forced assimilation and Hmong were forbidden to practice their cultural traditions and shaman rituals. Hmong fathers were forced to allow their daughters to marry Chinese men. Most Hmong fled for more remote provinces; the White Hmong moved north, Black Hmong moved south, and Flowery Hmong moved west into the Yunnan to live with other Hmong who had previously fled.

The Hmong who fled to the Yunnan formed an alliance with the large Muslim population who had long established itself as the predominant group in the region. From 1818-1873 the Muslims staged several unsuccessful rebellions against the Chinese. The Hmong, considered by the Chinese as cohorts of the Muslims, were treated as rebels and controlled under military rule. Many Muslim and Hmong in the Yunnan province died of starvation and the bubonic plague. Those who survived were murdered under the order of Chinese General Shao Ta-jen. Many Muslim and Hmong men escaped, but the 6,000 women, children, and elderly who remained were slaughtered and their bodies discarded in the streets. Hundreds of thousands more were murdered in China's continuing quest for control of the Yunnan province. Under the Manchu, more Hmong died than under any other Chinese dynasty. Hmong legends tell of a river flowing red with the blood of Hmong murdered by the Manchu. Those who survived formed a mass exodus into Southeast Asia.³²

Life in Southeast Asia

Historians estimate that approximately fifteen percent of the Hmong in China fled to Southeast Asia in the early nineteenth century. The Hmong who escaped the Chinese genocide faced severe challenges crossing over the harsh mountain ranges between China, Vietnam, and Laos. Oral legends tell of a frozen mountain where many Hmong suffered from frostbite, hypothermia, and death. Some Hmong were captured by Chinese troops and forced to return to China or be killed. The Hmong who arrived in Laos settled on mountainsides averaging between 1,000 and 5,000 meters in elevation. This

³² Quincy, 52-59; Cha, 12-14.

geographic location strategically aligned with the ideal climate for growing opium, the Hmong's primary crop. Other Hmong who went to Vietnam first had suffered from malaria and attacks from tigers and elephants in the lowlands. They learned of the fertile lands that suited opium cultivation and relocated to the highlands of northeastern Laos, just a few miles from the Vietnam border but far away from lowland problems. Opium cultivation provided great financial benefits to the Hmong as China had no fewer than fifteen million opium addicts by 1870. The Hmong traded directly with the Chinese as well as French and British colonists who encouraged opium production. This brought the Hmong into the international opium business as a serious trader. However, growing poppies quickly severely depleted the soil of vital nutrients. This established a nomadic aspect of the Hmong, as they relocated every few years when the soil lost its viability. The Hmong enjoyed nearly a century of uninterrupted peace in Laos, along with financial benefits from the sale of opium.³³

By 1894 the Ninh plateau in Laos had nearly 20,000 Hmong living in more than 2,000 houses. Situated more than three hundred miles south of the Chinese Yunnan border the Hmong had firmly established this region as their new home. Other groups went further southeast into Thailand and established mountain villages there in 1885.

³³ Tapp, Michaud, Culas, and Lee, eds., 66, 72; Cha, 15; Mote, 102; Fungchatou T. Lo, *The Promised Land: Socioeconomic Reality of the Hmong People in Urban America (1976-2000)* (Bristol: Wyndham Hall Press, 2001), 21; Jon Boyes and S. Piraban, *Hmong Voices: A Collection of Interviews with the People of a White Hmong Village in Northern Thailand* (Chiang Mai: Trasvin Publications Limited Partnership, 1990), 9; Thao, 12-13, 70.

Hmong Discover Europeans

European missionaries, explorers, and militaries became interested in the Hmong in the late nineteenth century. The fetish of the exotic “oriental” fully blossomed with the European “discovery” of the Hmong in Southeast Asia. Anthropology and ethnology as academic fields supported a vast number of scholarly articles and books about the Hmong. The first European account of the Hmong was published in 1919 after personal interactions with remote Hmong villages in Northern Laos and Vietnam. The groups most interested in the Hmong were missionaries who sought to master the Hmong language in attempts to translate the Bible into local dialects to proselytize to those they encountered. Although shaped by the religious agenda of the missionaries and Eurocentric, the records of the first European missionaries are invaluable.³⁴

France wanted to become a dominant force in trade and politics in Southeast Asia and focused its interests on acquiring Vietnam, which it saw as holding value in location and natural resources. They caught a windfall in 1883 when Vietnam’s emperor Tu-Duc died and the Vietnamese court in Hue took on France as a protectorate. French Colonel Tournier claimed that in order to protect Vietnam, their key interest, Laos, had to come under full French rule. This signaled the beginning of French colonialism in Southeast Asia. Unlike their view of Vietnam and Cambodia, the French did not regard Laos as an ancient kingdom and saw no value in its preservation. France annexed Laos as an official territory in 1887. The French government had hoped to exploit the country’s vast natural resources including gold and precious metals. But this proved to be an impossible task.

³⁴ Tapp, Michaud, Culas, and Lee, eds., 72-75.

France failed to utilize the Mekong River to establish trade with China. It also never completed the necessary railway to support trade and gain access to the South China Sea to facilitate export to Europe. Laos remained the least important country under French rule in Southeast Asia, as it merely buttressed control of Vietnam. The French hoped to leverage their holdings in Laos to extend their reach into Thailand, a venture they failed to realize.³⁵

The French divided Laos into a protected kingdom in the north and an administered territory in the south. The legal status and rights of the Lao population were undefined under full French rule. The French classified the city of Luang Prabang as a protectorate leaving the rest of the country as a colonial state. All the divisions allowed the French to easily control all of Laos as they had separated the country into different unconnected regions. Laos did not benefit under French rule. Regarding Laos as a colonial backwater, France stunted the growth of the landlocked country. Efforts to establish trade down the Mekong proved futile by the end of the nineteenth century. It became clear that Laos would never benefit France economically, so the colony began to employ alternative approaches of support, such as corvee labor to build infrastructure.³⁶

In 1885, the French found itself in a conflict with a rebellious Vietnamese emperor who seemed determined on overthrowing France's East India Trading Company. The Hmong helped the French find and capture the rogue emperor and gained their respect. The French had an existing relationship with the Hmong connected through the

³⁵ Martin Stuart-Fox, "The French in Laos, 1887-1945," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (February 1995): 111- 116. Accessed March 24, 2015. [http://jstor.org/stable 312913](http://jstor.org/stable/312913).

³⁶ Stuart-Fox, 115-122.

cultivation and sale of opium. The Hmong's bravery and knowledge of the vast mountains impressed the French and led them to a stronger alliance within the opium trade. Quickly, the French demanded more opium than could be harvested and this deteriorated the relationship. Adding to the tension between the colonizers and colonized included the fact that only very few French colonial officials were stationed in Laos; most of the European authority presented itself as Vietnamese with French educations. Tensions between Vietnam and Laos had shattered at the turn of the fifteenth century when Vietnam invaded Laos. This made for a contentious colonial relationship. Vietnamese treated Laotians as inferior because France merely used Laos to buttress its control of Vietnam.

Although they formed alliances when needed, the French generally treated the Hmong very poorly. The French implementation of heavy taxes and forced labor to build infrastructure caused even more resentment and hostility. The French saw taxes and forced labor as a way to pay for the expenses of the colony. This resulted in a Hmong rebellion that lasted from 1901 to 1907. Lowland Lao were charged with collecting taxes from the Hmong on behalf of the French, but the local Lao officials pocketed most of the money. The Hmong felt betrayed, as they had been forthcoming and helpful to the French. Additional resentment grew after conflicts with Vietnamese civil servants in Laos.³⁷ The lack of French colonial officials and the abuses of lowland Lao towards the Hmong led to a collapse of the relationship between the French and the Hmong that lasted for decades.

³⁷ Mote, 103-105; Stuart-Fox, 115-122.

A group of Hmong rebelled against the French in the “Madmen’s War” in 1919 in opposition of heavy taxation. The French forced many Hmong to work without pay for several weeks a year as part of the forced labor they implemented. The conflict lasted for three years and resulted in Hmong establishing their own state and local administration for representation in Nong Het, located on a 4,500 foot mountain pass on the Vietnam-Laos border. Relationships between the French and Hmong began to improve and were regarded as positive by most Hmong. Hmong still had conflicts with Vietnamese and Lao bureaucrats, but as long as French officials were present, violence between the groups remained minimal. Hmong boys also received western educations in French-run schools in northern Laos and Vietnam. Many modified their clan names, and placed their given names first. These first Hmong to receive western educations saw learning as the pathway to better lives for all Hmong. This positive view on education would follow the Hmong when they resettled in the United States beginning in the 1970s.³⁸

By the 1930s, most Hmong viewed their relationship with the French as a path to improved lives, status, and education. The French offered opportunities of education and improved infrastructure in Laos that benefited the Hmong. It was estimated that more than 100,000 Hmong lived in Laos by the end of the 1930s. But when France surrendered to the Nazis in 1940, the effects were felt in all its colonies. The Japanese arrived in Southeast Asia and took all of France’s holdings. All hopes of an improved future crumbled under Japanese rule. The Japanese took over many of the industrial projects

³⁸ Wendy Mattison, Laotou Lo, and Thomas Scarseth, eds., *Hmong Lives: From Laos to La Crosse Stories of Eight Hmong Elders* (La Crosse: The Pump House, 1994), 65-67; Hamilton-Merritt, 19-20.

established by the French but forced the Hmong to perform dangerous tasks. Hmong who worked in silver mines were forced to sleep in the shafts, and several collapses claimed hundreds of lives. The Japanese refused to close the mines and continued to force the Hmong to work. The Japanese quickly gained a reputation for being cruel and merciless, and Hmong living in the mountains retreated even deeper to avoid being forced to work for them. Under Japanese occupation the Hmong, Laos, and all of French Indochina became cut off and isolated from the western world.³⁹

After France failed to infiltrate and free Laos from the Japanese, the Lao king declared itself an independent nation on April 8, 1945, although it would not receive full independence until 1954. The Lao king also declared itself as an ally of Japan after unrelenting pressure from Japanese troops. One week later, Communist Viet Minh troops attempted to gain control of Laos to strengthen themselves in the region. Although they failed, their intentions were clear; they wanted to capture Laos as they regarded it as a part of central Vietnam. This attempt fueled President Dwight D. Eisenhower's concerns that Laos might fall to communism. Rumors of the American bombing of Hiroshima and Japan's impending surrender spread throughout Japanese troops in Laos. By mid-August, Japanese in Laos knew their days were numbered and fifty officers simultaneously committed suicide. Some performed the ritual *hara-kiri*, while others placed a grenade to their chest and pulled the pin. Many Hmong witnessed this and considered the mass suicide as peculiar and disturbing. They left the dead Japanese soldiers along with their

³⁹ Hamilton-Merritt, 19-22, 69; Tapp, Michaud, Culas, and Lee, eds., 441.

supplies and retreated back to their villages. Remaining Japanese joined Viet Minh troops in Vietnam, others, according to Hmong legends, “disappeared with the wind.”⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Hmong traversed thousands of miles over many millennia. They encountered challenging mountain ranges where they made their homes, fought military invaders, cultivated and traded opium internationally, and resisted forced assimilation. Surviving through multiple dynasties in China before seeking refuge in Laos, they shaped their lives and cultures. They adopted some aspects of those they encountered, but rejected many things that did not align with their framework of independence. The Hmong always sought to maintain a clearly defined identity, free from external, or internal, domination. Through all the changes faced, their ability to adapt to a multitude of environments ensured not just their ability to survive, but also a guarantee to thrive.

⁴⁰ Hamilton-Merritt, 22-36.

Crossing the Mekong:

The C.I.A., Escape to Thailand, and the Refugee Camp Experience

Violence experienced by the Hmong in China paled in comparison to what they endured in Southeast Asia. Many died fighting for the United States during the Vietnam War, and even more were killed at the hands of communist troops. They survived attempted genocides and annihilations under the communist regime of Laos, led by communist leader Pathet Lao, after being abandoned by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) following the Vietnam War. Pathet Lao declared the Hmong traitors because they supported the United States. The Hmong fled into the dense Southeast Asian jungle and emerged, sometimes after many years, at the political border of Laos and Thailand: the Mekong River. Crossing the Mekong River from Laos into Thailand represented the only chance of survival. The conditions met at the Thai refugee camps disrupted Hmong culture and fractured the Hmong's independent identity, as they were now under Thai rule. In the camps, they temporarily lost the ability to self-govern and provide sustenance for their families through agriculture. They were forced to rely on food rations and limited water supplies in the Thai camps. Diseases ran rampant through the camps and many children, too weak to fight and without sufficient medicine, died as the most frequent victims. In the camps the traditional male-dominated Hmong culture flipped on its head; for the first time, women now had many educational and employment opportunities, but men, powerless to provide for their families without land to cultivate,

felt displaced and lacked purpose. Through oral traditions, the strength to survive was found, along with a deep sense of independence rooted within their culture. They preserved their culture and community despite terrible circumstances. Through the introduction of education in the refugee camps, Hmong men and women were given new tools to succeed at their next destination, the United States.

The CIA and Broken Promises

Laos gained full independence from France at the Geneva Convention in 1954 at the height of the Cold War. The new neutral Lao government, neither communist nor anti-communist, caused western governments, specifically the United States, to take an interest in Laos, and missions were established to guide and control the new nation's military and economy. The United States feared that the Soviet Union would perceive Laos as weak and turn the government from neutral into communist. Missions in Laos allowed the United States to test strategies in the fight against communism. President Eisenhower, following policies established by President Harry Truman, intended on using any means necessary to keep the Lao "domino" from falling; western nations feared that if one country fell to communism, the entire continent would follow.

In *Waging the Peace*, President Eisenhower expressed grave concern of the threat of communism spreading throughout Asia: "despite its remoteness, we were determined to preserve the independence of Laos against a take-over backed by its neighbors to the north—Communist China and North Vietnam. For the fall of Laos to Communism could mean the subsequent fall—like a tumbling row of dominos—of its still-free neighbors, Cambodia and South Vietnam and, in all probability, Thailand and Burma. Such a chain

of events would open the way to Communist seizure of all Southeast Asia.”⁴¹ President Eisenhower saw communism as a real threat to the freedom of the United States and was determined to control and stop its spread.

The United States’ involvement in Vietnam began during French colonial times in the early 1950s. The United States provided \$20 million of financial backing to support French interests in Southern Vietnam, including containment of Vietminh leader Ho Chi Minh, a confessed Marxist. Although Ho sent letters to Truman asking for assistance in rebuilding an independent Vietnam, President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson regarded Ho as a communist and a Soviet puppet and decided he must be suppressed. American advisers were sent to aid the separate South Vietnamese government, in direct violation of the Geneva Accords of 1954 that supported a unified Vietnam. Although South Vietnam was highly corrupt, the United States supported this government but was trapped under fear of losing control of the situation. By 1955, the United States had replaced France in Vietnam and the Vietnam conflict became the American conflict. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson saw withdrawal impossible, and United States involvement grew to more than 500,000 troops by the mid-1960s. The United States withdrew troops in 1975, and South Vietnam fell to communism. This was marked as the most unpopular war and the only war lost by the United States.⁴²

⁴¹ Hamilton-Merritt, 69; Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 983-4.

⁴² Foner, A-68, 995-996; William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 256-258.

The United States saw the communist North Vietnamese Army (NVA), backed by the Chinese and the Soviets, as a real threat that needed swift containment. President Kennedy's main objective consisted of countering communism around the globe. His concern followed the CIA's humiliating failure at the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba in 1961, which led to stronger alliance between Cuba and Soviet Union and expanded communism. American actions in Laos and Vietnam were driven by the fear that communism would gain even more momentum in Southeast Asia. By the late 1950s, the Vietnamese army had gained control of more than half of the provinces in Laos and the CIA saw this as requiring immediate action.⁴³ In 1961, under the direction of President Kennedy, the CIA recruited nearly 35,000 Hmong to support American war efforts in Southeast Asia as facilitated by U.S. Marine Colonel William "Billy" Lair, also trained by the CIA, and Lao Major General Vang Pao, a Hmong guerrilla fighter. To combat communist forces, the CIA needed people with knowledge of the terrain who had a vested interest in suppressing communism. The Hmong wanted to remain in Laos under a neutral government because they had fled China just a century before to escape genocide under the Chinese government. If Laos fell to the communists, the Hmong risked a loss of their independence. They wanted to help the United States defeat the NVA and return to their independent, peaceful lives. The CIA determined counterinsurgency as the most effective method in the region and "irregular forces," or special guerrilla units (SGUs), as the most effective troops.

⁴³ Jagodzinski and Kegel 17-19; Hamilton-Merritt, xxix, 69, 101; Foner, 978.

Negotiations between the CIA and Major General Vang Pao of the Royal Lao Army proceeded quickly as the NVA's threat to topple the Royal Lao government loomed. The Hmong, determined to save their adopted homeland, only asked for weapons, training, and food supplies. This aligned well with the CIA's desire to keep United States involvement and costs to a minimum. The Hmong became a perfect "Third Option" for the CIA—local counterinsurgents to fight insurgents.⁴⁴ The Hmong lived in the mountains of Northern Laos and knew the terrain; few outsiders could survive or navigate such harsh conditions. Many Hmong questioned General Pao's decision to risk so many Hmong lives, but he saw the alliance with the United States as the only way to defeat the communists determined to take over Laos. The fall of Laos to communism threatened the puppet government set up in South Vietnam by the United States. In addition to providing food and weapons, the CIA also promised to relocate the Hmong if the United States lost the war.⁴⁵ Specifically, Colonel Lair told Vang Pao that the United States offered refugee assistance. Vang Pao, Tasseng Yang, and other Hmong clan leaders met with the Americans and asked for specific details of the agreement. "If we defeat the Vietnamese, how will you help us?", they asked. Colonel Lair replied, "if Hmong people beat the Vietnamese, then we will help the Hmong people as much as we can. If the Hmong people lose, we will find a new place where we can help the Hmong

⁴⁴ Hamilton-Merritt, 88-89.

⁴⁵ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 56-57.

people.” The Hmong leaders regarded this as acceptable, and Vang Pao signed an agreement that 500 guns would be delivered to the Hmong in eight days.⁴⁶

During the war, Hmong troops successfully blocked North Vietnamese communist troops from transporting goods to the south along the Ho Chi Minh Trail on the eastern border of Laos and the western border of Vietnam. They also rescued American pilots shot down by the NVA in Laos. They rushed to remote sites where planes and helicopters crashed and rescued the injured and radioed for help. Hmong recovered the bodies of many dead American pilots who would have otherwise remained missing. Entire families joined the effort; men, women, and children used their farming tools to fell trees, clear brush, and make way for planes to land. Women held important roles in the war effort, just as men did. Hmong built airstrips on dangerous mountainsides to allow American planes to deliver the weapons and food supplies. They gathered intelligence, watched, and waited to launch surprise attacks on the NVA. Some Hmong men, after being trained by the United States, became accomplished fighter pilots, although they had never even driven a car before the war. The CIA believed the royal capital of Luang Prabang and administrative capital of Vientiane to be primary NVA targets, and they spared no expense in protecting those assets. The CIA feared if the two cities fell, the rest of Laos and Southeast Asia would follow under Eisenhower’s domino theory. The Hmong fought the NVA in violent battles and suffered staggering losses all under the pretext that the United States would honor their agreement for resettlement.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Hamilton-Merritt, , 89, 92.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 103-110, 137-142.

One Hmong man remembered, “Many who fought were little boys, no older than 11 or 12 . . . Many were so small that their machine guns hung down to their ankles then they were strapped on to their shoulders.”⁴⁸ The CIA and the United States government had little concern for the safety and well being of the Hmong. The exploitation of so many children exemplified the lack of value the United States gave the Hmong; the loss of so many children disrupted the familial structure of thousands of Hmong families.

Elected in 1968, President Richard Nixon’s interest in foreign relations led to improved relations with the key forces of communism, the Soviet Union and China.⁴⁹ As early as 1969, the United States shifted its alliances from the Hmong, who risked their lives to save American troops, to the Soviets, with whom they now shared a mutual interest: an independent, neutral Laos. This common interest was rooted in serving the policy interests of the United States and the Soviet Union; Laos was no longer part of the equation. At a secret Committee Counsel hearing, Roland A. Paul asked if the United States had any written, verbal, or moral obligation to General Vang Pao or his Hmong troops, William Sullivan, U.S. Ambassador to Laos from 1964-69, stated that the Hmong held “no formal obligation upon the United States.” Senator J. William Fulbright found Sullivan’s denials to be “an absurdity” and asked Sullivan, “Where does it all lead to?” Sullivan responded by insisting that the war in Laos continue to remain a secret.⁵⁰ The CIA officially broke its agreement with the Hmong when the United States withdrew from Vietnam in 1975 under the Paris Agreement of 1973, they left the Hmong to fight

⁴⁸ Sheila Cohen, *Mai Ya’s Long Journey* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005), 6.

⁴⁹ Foner, 1021.

⁵⁰ Hamilton-Merritt, 225-229.

against the communist regime in Laos. General Pao negotiated with American officials to evacuate his troops, and they agreed to take 1,000 men out. General Pao clung to the promises made by the CIA to the Hmong and fought for the survival of the Hmong. He argued that there were many more Hmong soldiers and they agreed to take 2,500 out. But the necessary evacuation planes never came. The CIA had abandoned the Hmong. Over the next few days, some planes did come but only a small number of Hmong got out. The planes were Cessnas, too small to take any significant numbers out. Hmong pilots took their planes and packed them full of women, children, and other Hmong troops. General Pao, who so desperately wanted to save Laos for his people, was evacuated to Thailand and processed as a refugee of the Vietnam War. He represented one of the first of what would be hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Laos to Thailand.

Some American troops who served in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War found the abandonment of the Hmong deeply troubling. Darrel Whitcomb, a U.S. Air Force pilot who worked alongside the Hmong, remembered the experience as painful and explained how “it now bothers me a great deal how we just packed up and left those people. We knew that they were going to suffer. I find it hard to believe that anyone in this world would ever trust us again. As far as I’m concerned, our word is no good.”⁵¹ Pulitzer prize-winning Vietnam War journalist Peter Arnett explained that the Hmong “regard themselves as the abandoned luggage of a lost American war.”⁵² A State

⁵¹ Hamilton-Merritt, 337-351; Foner, 1030.

⁵² Peter Arnett, “Victims of War: Laotian Refugees Languish in Camps,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1979, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/158864298/A376F234408A4E0CPQ/2?accountid=10358>.

Department specialist on the Vietnam War who opposed the United States actions in Southeast Asia stated, “the abysmal ignorance around the table of the particular facts of Vietnam. . . . They made absolutely no distinctions between countries with completely different historical experiences. . . . They [believed] that we could manipulate other states and build nations; that we knew all the answers.”⁵³ The Hmong’s abandonment haunted those who knew the United States had broken its promises.

Before contact with the CIA, the population of the Hmong in Laos varied between 250,000 and 400,000. During the war, more than thirty percent died, nearly 100,000, mostly men and boys, and some as young as ten years old, in what came to be known as “the secret war” in Laos (1964-1973). This was the most elaborate covert operation ever orchestrated by the CIA. The United States, which had so diligently recruited them, left the Hmong for dead. The communist Lao People’s Party slaughtered another thirty percent of the Hmong in the “aftermath” of the war, as they declared those who had assisted the United States, and Vang Pao, to be traitors. They declared a “death warrant” against them and ordered officers to “shoot to kill” any Hmong discovered. Nearly 250,000 Hmong made their way across the mountains of Laos and over the raging Mekong River to refugee camps in Thailand.⁵⁴

⁵³ Foner, 995.

⁵⁴ Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir*, (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2008), 2-3, 7-8; Keyes Beech, “Laotians Flee as Vietnam Tightens Grip,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1979, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/162613803/CD52B11461014978PQ/1?accountid=10358>; Lewis M. Simons, “Ex-Mercenaries for CIA Fighting Laotian Regime” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1975, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/157883984/DC950577885847ACPQ/1?accountid=10358>; Cohen, 7.

Crossing the Mekong into Thailand

After the United States left Laos, the remaining Hmong fled deep into the jungles of northeastern Laos to hide. Many stayed hidden for years, moving every few days to evade the communist troops ordered to execute them. Xai Thoa recalled, “We were so scared, for three years we had to keep hiding . . . We would build a shelter of leaves and sticks in the jungle. We would stay there until it was safe to move on.” With food scarce, many ate what they could forage, “grasses, weeds, and whatever we could find to stay alive.”⁵⁵ With the communist troops on the hunt for the Hmong, farming became impossible, making food even scarcer; many starved to death in the jungles. Lao troops often caught, raped, and beat Hmong women. In 1975, 10,000 Hmong refugees attempted to cross a bridge over the Mekong at Hin Heup from Laos into Thailand. The bridge served as safe passage for the Hmong to cross the Mekong River; it represented the border between Laos and Thailand. If they crossed, they had a chance to survive in the refugee camps. Heavily fortified with communist Lao troops, the Hmong approached the bridge and encountered a storm of bullets. Dozens of Hmong died or suffered serious injuries; those who survived fled into the jungle, and passed along word to others to avoid the bridge. As they hid in the jungles, parents took desperate measures to quiet children to avoid detection by the Lao troops. Some parents gave their babies opium and accidentally killed them. Many elderly and injured, too weak to traverse the treacherous

⁵⁵ Cohen, 8-9.

terrain, had to surrender.⁵⁶ Kou Chang, who hid in the woods for five months with his family, recalled seeing children suckling their dead mothers breasts because they did not know they had died. Orphaned children often died, as they lacked extra food or anyone to care for them.⁵⁷

The Mekong River became the final resting ground for many Hmong refugees. Comparable in width to the Mississippi, the Mekong claimed nearly half of the Hmong who tried to cross it. Shu Blong Her remembered, “I myself swam across the Mekong River with two pieces of bamboo trees, bamboo underneath my arms to help me float and so that made things very, very difficult . . . My parent’s didn’t have a chance to escape because we were starving in the jungle, and they had to go back to surrender to the communist regime just for survival.”⁵⁸ To try and evade the NVA and Lao troops, most Hmong crossed the Mekong in the dark of night. As mountain dwelling people, many did not know how to swim and relied on plastic bottles and old rubber tires for support.⁵⁹ Once across, they encountered Thai people who robbed many of the Hmong. Too weak to fight and nearly dead, many Hmong forfeited their remaining money and jewelry.⁶⁰ The experiences of the Hmong exodus from Laos, across the Mekong, and into Thailand forever changed the structure of Hmong families, as many children and elderly died in the jungles. The Hmong were victimized by the communist Lao troops for aiding the

⁵⁶ Jagodzinski and Kegel, 32; Mace Goldfarb, M.D., *Fighters, Refugees, Immigrants: A Story of the Hmong* (Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books Inc., 1982), 10.

⁵⁷ Kou Chang and Sheila Pinkel, *Kou Chang’s Story: The Journey of a Laotian Hmong Refugee Family* (Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1993), 19, 22.

⁵⁸ Jagodzinski and Kegel, 32-33.

⁵⁹ Patricia Moore-Howard, 34.

⁶⁰ Chang and Pinkel, 23.

United States, and then by Thai villagers who knew their vulnerable position. Shifts in Hmong politics, social structure, and culture resulted in the camps. New western concepts of education for women and commerce introduced in the camps further changed the structure of the Hmong as a whole.⁶¹

Survival in the Thai Camps

By late 1979, more than 250,000 Hmong successfully arrived at refugee camps in Thailand.⁶² Thailand had many refugee camps, more than a dozen, but the Hmong concentrated in Ban Vinai camp, because of placement through the Thai government and its proximity to the Lao border. Ban Vinai housed the largest concentration of Hmong in the world.⁶³ They represented a significant portion of the more than 10,000,000 refugees worldwide in the late 1970s.⁶⁴ The Hmong met deplorable conditions in the Thai refugee camps. Comparable to Japanese internment camps in the United States, the camps' conditions interrupted the identity held by the Hmong. "Their status, character, and lives," were disrupted as the Thai treated the Hmong as criminals, not refugees seeking help.⁶⁵ Surrounded by barbed wire and metal fences, the Hmong were frequently forbidden from leaving the Thai camps as a means of control because they were considered illegal immigrants by the Thai government. Kao Chang, an American-Hmong

⁶¹ Kathy Morrissey Coulson and Paula Cookson Melhorn, *Living in Two Worlds: The Hmong Women's Project* (Fitchburg, The Hmong Women's Project, 2000), 15.

⁶² Beech.

⁶³ Dwight Conquergood, "Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp" Performance, Communication, and Culture," *TDR MIT Press* Vol. 32 no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 188. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145914>.

⁶⁴ Peter Arnett, "10.5 Million Homeless Span the Globe. Refugees—A 'Fourth World' of Misery," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1979, accessed October 5, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/158845925/D44C20C884404D1BPQ/1?accountid=10358>.

⁶⁵ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 69.

who endured life at Chiang Kham camp explained, “My wife and child slept on a board that was hard and barely enough room for the three of us. There was no light and ventilation and it got very hot.”⁶⁶ Vietnamese refugees who sought refuge in Thai camps after Saigon fell to communism, and later immigrated to the United States, also likened the experience to being in jail. Parallel to the Japanese-American experience, entire Hmong families crammed into single rooms that lacked basic indoor plumbing and rudimentary cooking facilities, if any.

Thailand lacked sufficient manpower and facilities to accommodate the tsunami of Hmong refugees. The Thai strategically placed camps along the borders with Laos, as they anticipated some refugees, but not nearly as many as their received. The lack of resources in Thailand to accommodate the massive numbers of Hmong refugees led to an official government policy after April 4, 1975, that all new immigrants would not be regarded as refugees, but as illegal immigrants. By September 1977, the camps suffered such severe overcrowding that the Thai had to set in place a definitive system for dealing with the continuing influx of Hmong. Few other countries accepted Hmong as refugees unless they were educated and could contribute to their new country. Most refugees were illiterate farmers without familial ties to any western country. Refugees with educations and job skills were viewed as potential contributing members of their new country. But those who lacked education were seen as potential financial burdens by the governments of many western nations, as they had no way to support themselves, or their families, once resettled. This led to long-term residency in refugee camps; without a new country

⁶⁶ Chang and Pinkel, 36.

in which to resettle, no means of gaining education or job skills, most Hmong spent an average of seven years in the camps. The Thai outlined a six-point system for the remaining Hmong: all refugees were placed in camps; all were issued identification cards; all refugees sought out placement in a third country; all refugees contributed to the well being of the camps conditions, (sanitation, security, education, etc.); all refugees learned Thai language and culture, as well as English and French; and all refugees with occupational skills contributed to ease the burden on the Thai government.⁶⁷ The mandatory education of all Hmong in the camps led to the first opportunities for women to go to school.

The United Nations held a conference in Geneva in 1979 to deal with the refugee issue in Indochina. The needs of “boat people” from Vietnam overshadowed the needs of Hmong and Laotians in Thailand. While the American conflict in Vietnam gained international attention, the Hmong’s involvement remained unknown to the general public. The United Nations secured agreements for many western nations, specifically France and Australia, to accept 8,000 refugees monthly. The United States eventually agreed to increase the number of refugees from Thai camps from 6,000 to 10,000 monthly. Forty-eight western countries provided nearly \$150,000 to the United Nations to support refugees who remained in Thai refugee camps. The United States frequently received criticism from American religious and humanitarian groups for being too slow in accepting refugees. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service eventually sped

⁶⁷ Phuwadol Songprasert, “The Thai Government’s Policies Towards Indochinese Refugees, 1975-1987” in *Thailand: A First Asylum Country for Indochinese Refugees* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies Chulalongkorn University, 1988), 5, 9. 35-38, 103.

up the process of accepting Indochinese refugees in 1983. The United States played a major role in creating the refugee crisis, but was reluctant to follow through with international agreements to aid those affected.⁶⁸

The number of Hmong refugees, nearly 45,000 in 1975 alone, overwhelmed Thai resources. The Hmong received only one cup of rice per person per day and lacked enough firewood to cook. Desperate for food, when given bananas, the Hmong also ate the peels to fight impending starvation. Fresh water, scarce and expensive, made drinking and bathing difficult as most families only had one five-gallon bucket to use to transport water. The United Nations (UN) took responsibility for feeding, clothing, and providing essential services to the Hmong, and some aspects of their living conditions improved. As a humanitarian organization, the UN also helped to coordinate resettlement plans in western countries.⁶⁹

Disease and Death in the Camps

Hmong refugees arrived at the Thai camps after hiding for months, and sometimes years, in the jungles of Laos. Most were malnourished with weakened immune systems. Their fragile conditions aided the spread of communicable diseases that thrived in overcrowded and unsanitary camps. Aid workers from the United Nations and other NGOs made valiant efforts to treat diseases that ran rampant throughout the camps. Many doctors from Europe and the United States who worked in the camps naively thought they would be treating mostly exotic tropical diseases, rare diseases they had

⁶⁸ Songprasert, 48, 108.

⁶⁹ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 71; Jagodzinski and Kegel, 33-4, 116.

only read about in medical book. In reality, most of the diseases treated resulted from poor living conditions and inadequate sanitation facilities.⁷⁰ Belgian Doctor Jacques Labeeuw, who worked at Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in 1979, explained how the shift from rural homesteads to cramped camp conditions led to a multitude of “skin diseases, malaria, pneumonia, severe diarrhea and very bad malnutrition.”⁷¹ Many suffered from long-lasting respiratory infections and asthma. Many children contracted and died from tuberculosis, which ran rampant in the crowded camp conditions.⁷² Cholera also killed many in the camps, as the poor conditions of the outhouses did nothing to contain contaminated sewage. Dr. Karen Olness recalled, “I see a boy with clinical hepatitis. I try to explain about fecal contamination. With the open sewers and chronic water shortage here, it’s little wonder we see so much infectious hepatitis.”⁷³

Inadequate outhouses overflowed regularly and the camps flooded during monsoon rains. Human excrement piled up between buildings. Entire camps shared a few filthy latrines dispersed throughout the camps and consisting of rudimentary pit toilets.⁷⁴ To use the toilet, one had to bring a bucket of water hauled from across the camp to flush it. Due to overcrowding, camp administrators often kept the toilets locked, and refugees

⁷⁰ Goldfarb, 28

⁷¹ United Press International, “Meo Hill People: Laotian Tribal Customs Hinder Medical Efforts,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 1979, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/162676524/4CD2D8D58184A53PQ/1?accountid=10358>.

⁷² Lynellyn D. Long, *Ban Vinai: The Refugee Camp* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74, 97; Hakon Torjesen, Karen Olness M.D., and Erik Torjesen, *The Gift of the Refugees: Notes of a Volunteer Family at a Refugee Camp* (Eden Prairie: The Garden, 1981), 34.

⁷³ Torjesen, Olness, and Torjesen, 33-34.

⁷⁴ Thomas Dublin, ed. *Immigrant Voices: New Lives in America 1773-1986* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). 258-9; Chang and Pinkel, 35-6; Karen O’Connor, *Dan Thuy’s New Life in America* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1992), 20.

needed to get a key to access the toilet, keys that frequently were lost. Most small children found this process to be cumbersome and annoying, and found their own place to relieve themselves in small streams and behind camp buildings: these were the same streams where the children played. This led to a huge sanitation problem, as small children made up twenty-five percent of camp populations. When the rainy season came, the toilets overflowed and flooded nearby rivers and creeks, further contaminating the scarce source of drinking water. The stench from the raw, untreated sewage and piles of garbage cast an unmistakable odor across the camp. A passage in a Thai ledger noted a statement by a Hmong in Ban Vinai: “It’s a horrible smell when the wind blows especially from that garbage pit down to our houses, sometimes we can’t eat anymore.”⁷⁵ Charitable organizations donated animals to boost food availability, but failed to realize that Hmong do not drink milk and since the animals were gifted to the community, no one person was authorized to slaughter them. This contributed to the sanitation problem throughout the camps; overwhelming numbers of ducks, geese, chickens, pigs, and cows were loose. Most families kept their livestock in their huts at night to protect them against predators, but this too led to major health and sanitation problems.

In 1984, the birthrate at Ban Vinai reached 5.5%, leading to a population boom that exceeded available resources. Children were highly regarded in Hmong culture and society and children represented survival. To alleviate the housing shortage many Hmong built themselves thatched roofed huts with dirt floors that became mud pits during the rainy season. These were similar to the houses they had in Lao villages and they used

⁷⁵ Conquergood, 189, 199.

what resources they could find in and around the camps. In order to ease the overcrowding in the camps, the United Nations built 395 tin-roofed buildings with concrete floors, each with ten small rooms. Although an improvement, the tin roofs and concrete floors make the rooms sweltering in the hot Southeast Asian summers.⁷⁶

Refugee Camp Culture

The shift to refugee camp life also contributed to changes within Hmong culture.⁷⁷ After surviving in the jungles and then forced to live under Thai rule, the Hmong quickly adapted to their new surroundings. Hmong life changed dramatically from small, rural villages of a few dozen families to crowded camps of tens of thousands.⁷⁸ Survival became the sole focus, and traditions established for generations ceased to exist in the camps. Like Japanese-Americans forced into internment camps, the Hmong abandoned all but what they could bring with them. The more than twenty Hmong clans identified themselves through specific ways of expression and differentiation, including symbolic clothing, jewelry, and adornments. The loss of personal possessions, and the inability to replace them, disrupted the Hmong identity in the camps. Ceremonial clothing, jewelry, and spiritual items left in Laos or lost along the way interrupted the traditional and ceremonial practices they served. The loss of identification also disrupted the social hierarchy so critical to Hmong culture. As most Hmong found themselves crammed in with several other members of their own and other

⁷⁶ Conquergood, 188; Goldfarb, 14.

⁷⁷ United Press International; Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 93.

⁷⁸ Conquergood, 188.

families the long-established male hierarchy all but disappeared in the camps. Male elders had no land to farm and the emergence of educational opportunities reshaped long established gender roles. Cramped living quarters and education contributed to the changes. Most refugee camps, in order to maintain control, forbid or limited freedom to leave the camps. Colonel Vichitmala, Thai camp commander at Ban Vinai, placed armed guards around the perimeter; aid workers remember several refugees shot trying to leave the camp. This led to strict regulations and a total loss of power over a previously self-governing people. After running for their lives from communists in Laos, the Hmong found themselves ultimately powerless and subjugated to rule by the Thai government. This challenged the core of the Hmong's identity of self-rule. Suicide rates soared in Ban Vinai. One Hmong man explained to aid worker Dwight Conquergood that in Laos, and previously China, if a family had a problem, one member could leave and go stay with another family in a neighboring village to cool down. With nowhere to go in Ban Vinai, many found suicide the only option for escape. The introduction of education and the lack of space and freedom to deal with social problems led to overwhelming frustrations within the Hmong communities that had formed in the refugee camps.

No matter where a refugee comes from, many people in camps across the globe suffered from the same problem: boredom. Many passed the time by playing cards, ball games, or singing.⁷⁹ But the Hmong benefited from all this free time; many Hmong developed elaborate performances to entertain themselves and others while in the camps.

⁷⁹ Carol A. Mortland, "Transforming Refugees in Refugee Camps," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* Vol. 16 no. 3/4 (Fall-Winter 1987): 388-400. Accessed March 4, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40553111>; Conquergood, 188-190.

Dwight Conquergood, a health worker hired by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), worked in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in the mid-1980s. He described the camp as, “an embarrassment of riches in terms of cultural performance. No matter where you go . . . you can hear two or three performances . . . storytelling and folk singing to the elaborate collective ritual performances for the dead that orchestrate the multiple media, including drumming, stylized lamentation, ritual chanting, manipulation of funerary artifacts, incense, fire dancing, and animal sacrifice.” Not a single morning passed where Conquergood woke without the “ecstatic” drumming or chanting of a shamanistic ritual. “Performance permeates the fabric of everyday life on Ban Vinai.”⁸⁰ These performances exemplified cultural continuity; Hmong expressed their culture even while living in refugee camps.

The loss of all sense of hope of returning to Laos led to the creation of these performances as a way of recapturing their identity. The lives lost in the Secret War with the CIA and later genocide attempts from the communist Lao government did not break the Hmong. Now life under Thai rule in refugee camps was just another part of their journey. The cultural expressions in the camps highlighted their success of adaptation in times of crisis. They had lost their freedom in the camps, but reclaimed their cultural identity through these cultural performances. Hmong saw performances a way of trying to “regroup or salvage” what was left of themselves. Emphasis on old world traditions while displaced between their old and new uncertain lives was a way to reconnect with their own identity and to secure the survival of their culture. The Hmong traditionally

⁸⁰ Conquergood, 176-180.

passed down traditions through oral storytelling, and in the camps this became a vital tool for cultural preservation through song, dance, and performances.⁸¹ While many aspects of cultural expression grew in the camps, gender roles were disrupted and this led to issues on how men and women interacted.

Gender Roles Changed

A comprehensive fracture to Hmong gender roles occurred in the refugee camps as the focus shifted away from village life and agriculture to survival and eventual relocation to the west. The interactions between men and women in the camps represent just one of several profound changes.⁸² Aid workers first introduced Hmong women to western notions of female identity and individualism through trade of their embroidery. The Hmong adopted embroidery in China, and it was used on many everyday items like hats, baby carriers, and clothing to signify one's clan status. Embroidery placed on clothing and on "story cloths" was part of their oral tradition. In the Thai camps, many Hmong women wove story cloths that depicted their experiences working for the CIA and their plight of survival in the jungles of Laos.⁸³ The aid workers noticed the intricate cloth embroidery made by Hmong women and encouraged them to sell their wares to western customers. American and European expatriates purchased the story cloths as souvenirs. Visits by United States governors and other government officials to the camps made for particularly good sales of the story cloths. Hmong with family already settled in the United States send cloths to America to sell at higher profits. Some of the story cloths

⁸¹ Conquergood, 180.

⁸² Faderman and Xiong, 128.

⁸³ White, 5-6.

depicted the chilling experiences of the Hmong during and after the war. Selling the cloths provided as much as ninety percent of a family's income in the camps, and for the first time gave the Hmong women a sense of independence in a male-dominated society. For the first time Hmong women interacted with notions of self-sustainability in the western capitalist market. Selling story cloths marked a pivotal point in which Hmong women engaged in financial transactions with western buyers that mirrored markets in the United States.⁸⁴

Many Hmong women also worked in camp hospitals. One aid worker recalled a man who opted to stay home with the children while his wife worked as nurse because she made more money than he. The husband's decision to allow his wife to be the breadwinner signaled an early turn in changing gender roles in the camps. After centuries of a male-dominated society, now a man allowed his wife to work while he tended to household duties. Although the husband made the decision to have his wife work, it shows she held agency in their relationship.⁸⁵ This represented a shift in how men regarded women and the ability of the Hmong to adapt and change in a given situation.

Thousands of Hmong in Thai camps began the long journey to resettlement in the United States, and a new life that would hold no resemblance to their old life in Laos. The newness of trade, female identity, and individualism symbolize just the first of many changes Hmong families experienced in this generation.⁸⁶ Of all the changes, the

⁸⁴ Faderman and Xiong, 70; Torjesen and Olness, 69; Goldfarb, 38; Long, 64, 210.

⁸⁵ Torjesen and Olness, 70.

⁸⁶ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 71; Chong Lo, Interview by author, November 17, 2014.

introduction of education instigated the most changes throughout the entire structure of the Hmong community.

Girls and Education

As part of the Thai government's six-point system, all Hmong children had to go to school. For the first time in history, Hmong girls received an education. The Thai Ministry of Education organized the schools, which were staffed with Thai teachers. Education in the camps led to a rapid increase in English literacy rates among Hmong youth and led to many positive impacts. The Thai government provided education through the sixth grade that also included Thai language classes. By 1986, nearly 5,000 Hmong children aged seven to fourteen went to school regularly in Ban Vinai camp. Many Hmong children began to regard themselves as part of a new Asia that included technology, wealth, and opportunities outside of the camps. The Thai government allowed the US Department of State to establish American high schools in the processing centers for children older than fourteen. The Thai government hoped that this would encourage more Hmong to quickly resettle in the United States, as English literacy and basic academic skills elevated their status as new contributing members of the United States.

In 1986 the U.S. Department of State developed a program for secondary school students, Preparation for American Secondary Schools (PASS). The objective was to increase English literacy among Hmong youth, ease the transition into mainstream American high schools, and ease culture shock. Eighty percent of Hmong youth in PASS previously had no English literacy skills. PASS was designed to resemble a typical

American high school, with classrooms, auditorium, library and sports. The also practiced fire drills, rode a school bus, and visited the school nurse. The cafeteria allowed students to practice using American money to buy food. A principal headed the administration, and teachers taught students to take exams and do homework. After completing the twenty-week program, the students had a graduation ceremony where they received a diploma. Teachers hired for the PASS program were typically affiliated with NGOs.

Classes at PASS schools also held typical forty-minute periods to acclimate students to the idea moving from class to class throughout the day. The most important periods were the three periods of English-as-a-second-Language (ESL): one period of listening and speaking, one period of grammar, and a third period of reading and writing. Students were placed in class levels that suited their ability. In addition to intensive ESL courses, American cultural courses, math, and even sports were offered, including electives. The high schools followed a traditional American school schedule and hoped to ease the transition of Hmong youth into the American school system one resettled. While still in the Thai camps, Hmong boys and girls received American educations. Hmong children who received American education in Thai camps regarded education as a symbol for the future, and the future lay in America.⁸⁷ Education paved the way for financial success and opportunities not previously available in Laos, but abundant in the United

⁸⁷ Long, 78-80; Margo Pfelger, "The PASS Program: Preparation for American Secondary Schools," (Washington D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1985), 1-4. Accessed March 25, 2015. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED378838.pdf>.

States. Kao Kalia Yang, born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in 1980, immigrated to Minnesota with her family in 1987. Yang learned about educational opportunities available to her in the United States while in Ban Vinai. She now holds advanced degrees from Columbia University and helps other immigrants learn English. She is just one of thousands of Hmong women who seized every educational opportunity available.⁸⁸

The establishment of American high schools in Thai processing centers coincided with the passing of Title IX in 1972, the Congressional ban of discrimination in higher education. Title IX followed President Johnson's Civil Rights Bill that prohibited, among other things, discrimination in schools based on race or gender. The passing of Title IX closely followed social movements sparked by opposition to the Vietnam War, a war that affected nearly every aspects of life in the United States. Old ways of doing things were challenged by opponents of the war, and education was one part of American life that changed. The fight for equality in education also mirrored civil rights movements that impacted all women in America. The fight for women's rights, although an independent movement, overlapped the fight for civil rights. Hmong women directly benefited from Title IX. Ironically, the war they had fought that placed them in the refugee camps spawned movements in the United States that later led to their education in the camps. Thousands of Hmong who risked their lives to help the United States benefitted from the results of those who opposed that very war. Additionally, the 1965 Hart-Celler Act reformed immigration criteria and opened up the United States to Asian immigrants, due to special provisions for refugees escaping communist countries. The United States

⁸⁸ Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 1-3, 91-2, 123.

regarded the Hmong refugees as future citizens and treated them as such by providing education and expanded opportunities by way of education.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Most Hmong families averaged seven years in the camps before resettlement.⁹⁰ Throughout the physical and emotional trauma, the Hmong expressed their resilience and emerged from the camps with a stronger sense of cultural identity than ever before. This may have been their great challenge and feat. Many western aid workers felt that the Hmong needed to become fully “Americanized” in order to survive. This naïve misconception could have proved disastrous for the future of the Hmong in the United States, but through retention of their culture the Hmong grew stronger than ever. The transition to the United States proved challenging, but the retention of culture and traditions overshadowed even the darkest of times. American education in Thailand paved the way for a multitude of educational opportunities that awaited the Hmong in the United States. Instead of losing their Hmongness, they maintained their cultural identity, and merely adopted the aspects of American culture that suited them.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Foner, 982, 986, 1026.

⁹⁰ Long, 6.

⁹¹ Mortland, 402.

Living a Hmong Us:
The Cultural Disconnect between Hmong Marriage Rituals
in Laos and the United States

The Hmong ritual of marriage formed on the basis of uniting two families, not the desires of the bride and groom. Hmong families were patriarchal and placed men, the most central figures in a family, at the height of importance. The Hmong male-dominated hierarchy placed females at the bottom of the social scale. A woman was to please the men in her family, first her father, and then after marriage, her husband. Bearing children became her primary contribution to both the family and the clan. Oftentimes enacted forcefully, arranged marriages and the bride prices they commanded frequently resulted in kidnappings and rapes. After a boy or man chose his bride, it was commonplace for him to make marriage arrangements with the elders without a woman's consent or knowledge. In other cases, a girl could be threatened with violence for not complying with a suitor's request.

Until immigration to the United States, most Hmong women did not question these age-old traditions from their male-dominated society. Patriarchy had always shaped the structure of the family. Once in the United States, many Hmong women attended English-language classes taught by volunteers around the country. One organization, the Indochinese Women's Project, taught "survival English" and other social skills to help

women assimilate.⁹² The cultural assimilation of Hmong youth to western customs and education challenged and disrupted Hmong marriage traditions. Limited English-language communication by the older generation further disconnected them from the younger generation's understanding of acceptable behaviors. Intervention of United States law also led to a change of marriage traditions. Along with western education that began in PASS schools in Thai camps came the introduction of American customs on dating, marriage, and social relationships. The immersion of Hmong youth into the western educational system and the understanding of the English language led some to challenge long-established traditions. At its zenith during the 1970s, the sexual revolution peaked just as the first wave of Hmong refugees arrived in the United States. Title IX and feminist movements expanded educational opportunities that affected all American women; within just one generation the entire social anatomy of Hmong gender roles and marriage patterns was reconstructed.⁹³

Traditional Hmong marriage in Laos

Well into the twentieth century, Hmong marriages in Laos focused on strengthening the alliances between families. Male elders held the power for negotiating the arrangement of marriage and women had little right to refuse. The most preferable marriage partner, marriage to the niece or nephew of a parent, strengthened familial ties. Restrictions from marrying a member of one's own clan were respected and included

⁹² Donnelly, 3.

⁹³ Thao, 109; Lo, interview; Donnelly, 133-49; Foner, 1026-7.

taboos on marriage to another Hmong with the same last name or clan name.⁹⁴ Typically, Hmong in Laos married at between twelve and eighteen years of age. Polygamy held an accepted place within Hmong marriages in Laos; in 1968 nearly one-fifth of Hmong men had multiple wives. Because each wife required the payment of a bride price, only wealthy men had multiple wives. Several reasons existed for a man to take on multiple wives. Bearing male children ranked highest in a woman's duties within a marriage. If a woman produced no male children a husband could marry a second, or even a third, wife. Male children held the responsibility, and still do today, for guiding the father's spirit to the afterworld upon his death. Without a male child, Hmong believe, a father's spirits cannot find its way back to the ancestral homeland.⁹⁵

Some wives in Laos saw polygamy as beneficial, as it brought in more hands to help with household duties and chores. First wives found a unique opportunity for authority in polygamous marriages as they held power and control over the rest of the wives. The western notion of marriage contrasts with the Hmong view of polygamy. Carol Mills worked for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Laos in 1965. She was shocked with the level of acceptance when she interviewed several Hmong woman in polygamous marriages. When asked if they felt upset that their husband had taken another wife one woman responded, "Oh no, it'll make my life so much easier. One of us will work in the field, one of us will watch the children,

⁹⁴ Robert Cooper and Nantham Cooper, *The Hmong* (Bangkok, Artasia Press, 1991), 26.

⁹⁵ Dia Cha, "Women in the Hmong Diaspora," in *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Mark Edward Pfeifer, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 178; Cooper and Cooper, 26; Thao, 101; Faderman and Xiong, 127.

and I don't have to do both." While some Hmong women disapproved of their husbands taking multiple wives, they had no authority to reject their husband's decision.⁹⁶

Each of the twenty Hmong clans, identified by their last names, can trace their lineage back to a single ancestor. The clan provided the foundation for all aspects of life: political, social, economic, and religious. The male elders' contribution to the clan served as the most important cornerstone of Hmong patrilineal society. Hmong tradition regarded men, like the trunks of trees, as the providers of strength, whereas women, like flowers and leaves, did not hold much value.⁹⁷ The male elders negotiated a "bride price" paid to the bride's family once a couple was paired. The bride price did not represent the purchasing of a wife, but instead helped to ensure that she would be treated well by the husband's family. If physically abused, the woman left the man and he forfeited the bride price he had paid. Women had some agency, and the forfeit of the bride price reflected that. The price paid also allowed the family to provide the bride with essentials to begin her new life: a few chickens, jewelry, and clothes. These served as a reminder to the groom's family of her birth family connection and their continued support even though she now lived in the groom's home. The marriage arrangements ensured that she would not be moved too far away from her family's village. Families deliberately married daughters to men in nearby villages to maintain clan ties.⁹⁸

Although many marriages resulted from of arrangements made between families, sometimes men took a more forceful approach. If a boy or a man liked a girl but she did

⁹⁶ Paul Hillmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 24.

⁹⁷ Cha, 178.

⁹⁸ Cooper and Cooper, 27-29.

not reciprocate his feelings, or if he feared his father could not pay the bride price, the boy took matters into his own hands. This approach to marriage, commonly known as “bridal abduction,” “marriage by capture,” or “bridal kidnapping,” involved an arrangement to have the girl “kidnapped.”⁹⁹ Sometimes the girl’s parents knew of the impending kidnapping; other times they did not. Once kidnapped and taken to the boy’s home, two men acting as messengers on the boy’s behalf, went to the girl’s parents’ home to inform them of where she had been taken.¹⁰⁰ The family then had little time to respond if its members wanted to prevent the marriage. If her family took no action to prevent the preceding events, the girl spent the next three days at the boy’s house and formal negotiations followed.

If, however, the mother of the girl wanted to prevent the wedding she had to immediately go to the boy’s house to retrieve her daughter. This exemplified the power, although very limited power, a woman held within the Hmong community. Once the union was consummated, whether through rape or consensual sex, it was too late to save the daughter, who would then marry the boy. If permitted to stay, she was considered “unclean” after having sex, willing or not, with the boy. Opposition to a daughter’s suitor expressed the smallest slice of power a woman would ever exert. If intent on stopping the kidnapping, the mother, along with a few other women, marched over to the boy’s house and forcefully retrieved her daughter. Unfortunately, just having merely stepped foot into the boy’s house rendered a girl dirty. Often, the mother failed to save her daughter

⁹⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰⁰ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 160-162.

because she was not notified of the abduction until it was too late. The mother could contest, but in a male-dominated society, her power was limited.¹⁰¹ Traditionally, once a girl had entered into a boy's family home, spent the night and had sex, she could no longer return to her own family's home. This approach to courtship ensured that the couple could marry without the initial interest of the girl or support of the families. Once the girl had stayed at the boy's house, the obligatory negotiations between the two families began for her; failure to do so resulted in a loss of face. Negotiations between the male elders of both families led to an agreed upon "bride price."¹⁰²

Once a girl had been chosen and taken by a suitor, her family had few options. With consummation of a sexual relationship, one of the first steps of wedding negotiations, it ensured that the girl's family could not refuse.¹⁰³ Even if the girl expressed interest in the boy, she had to resist his sexual advances by crying out "no, no, no; I'm not ready."¹⁰⁴ A traditional Hmong saying translates to "the boy must be strong to the girl, the girl must be shy to the boy."¹⁰⁵ This resistance proved her virtuous status. If the boy did not act forcefully his peers perceived him as weak, and if the girl did not resist she was considered licentious.¹⁰⁶ Within the Hmong culture, this is not regarded as rape, but the beginnings of marriage negotiations. A father held little choice but to enter

¹⁰¹ Faderman and Xiong, 134-135.

¹⁰² Cooper and Cooper, 29; Lo, *The Promised Land*, 161-162.

¹⁰³ Cooper and Cooper, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Myrna Oliver, "Immigrant Crimes: Cultural Defense—A Legal Tactic," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1988, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/909758758/943CABCAD95A4C48P/1?accountid=10358>.

¹⁰⁵ Katherine Bishop, "Asian Traditions at War with American Laws," *New York Times*, February 10, 1988, accessed October 4, 2014; Oliver.

¹⁰⁶ Cooper and Cooper, 29.

into negotiations, even if he did not like the suitor, as his daughter no longer had her virginity and it would be hard to find another man willing to accept her. The father could try to set a very high bride price, but had very little negotiating power as the ritual had already begun with her staying three nights in the boy's home. Even if the girl left before the three days, it was too late, as just entering the home rendered her unclean. The kidnapping marked a girl as claimed by the man, and although the consummation solidified the union, just entering the home changed her status within the community. The chance of finding another husband proved unlikely, as the entire village knew the circumstances.¹⁰⁷

The practice of arranged marriages by male elders continued after resettlement in the United States. Many Hmong communities were so tightly insulated that deeply rooted traditions, including bridal kidnapping and rape, continued without interruption in their new, western surroundings. What changed the established system of Hmong marriage was the introduction of western education in the refugee camps in Thailand. Many first-generation girls continued the practice without protest, but the second generation, and in some cases, the younger sisters of the first generation, vehemently objected. The divide between first-generation and second-generation behaviors blurred and overlapped as the younger sisters saw the hardships endured by their older sisters. In some families, younger siblings learned the lessons of their older siblings; they saw them forfeit education, struggle as young parents, and endure abusive marriages.¹⁰⁸ The different

¹⁰⁷ Faderman and Xiong, 134-135.

¹⁰⁸ Lo, interview.

experiences of children in the same family represent what may be regarded as two different generational experiences.

Cultural Changes in the United States

As thousands of Hmong refugees settled into life in the United States, the cultures and traditions they brought with them remained tightly woven into the fabric of their daily lives. As western notions of the choices afforded to women crept into their old ways, many Hmong found the harsh realities of cultural clashes too strong to ignore. Exposure to western education and customs challenged these practices. Young boys and girls received western educations that exposed them to contradictions between Hmong cultural practice and American society. Organizations that assisted in refugee resettlement, primarily NGOs and churches, reached out to young refugees and educated them about western norms to further ease their transition into American culture. In 1981, the Center for Applied Linguistics published “Young Adults in America: A Booklet for Refugees in their Late Teens.” The booklet, printed in Hmong and English, helped refugees navigate adolescence in America, covering topics from money and establishing a bank account, finding a job and getting an education, to understanding American ideas on sex, dating, marriage, and the laws that define them. The booklet also addressed the concept of living independently of your parents prior to marriage, an idea totally foreign to Hmong tradition.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ “Young Adults in America: A Booklet for Refugees in Their Late Teens,” (Washington D.C., Center for Applied Linguistics, 1981), 8-20.

Historically, Hmong woman had little power to make decisions that affected their lives. Most girls married by the age of eighteen and rarely had the option of education. Male elders and the suitor's family made marriage decisions, and a woman had no choice to refuse.¹¹⁰ Male-dominated societies regarded women as inferior beginning at birth. After a Hmong woman gave birth, the husband buried the baby's placenta in the earth under the family's home. He buried a baby girl's placenta in the ground under the family bed. In contrast, if the child were a boy, the placenta would be buried in the most sacred spot, under the central wooden pillar that supported the whole house. A woman's body was viewed as dirty and out of balance with the world for one month after giving birth. The Hmong also regarded a woman's body as unclean during menstruation, paralleling views held by Orthodox Judaism, and in many other cultures.¹¹¹ The high value placed on a male child and the placement of his placenta under the pillar explicates the contrasts in his worth over that of a female child. The revulsion over a woman's natural body functions exemplifies the male dominance in Hmong society.

Western aid workers and medical providers in the refugee camps first introduced Hmong women to the idea of the individual self and choice. The PASS high schools in the processing centers further introduced them to western culture and education. This signified the beginning of a long process of transition, not just to the United States as a place to live, but as a place to thrive as a Hmong. The process of cultural blending began

¹¹⁰ Faderman and Xiong, 127.

¹¹¹ Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), 5; Faderman and Xiong, 125.

in the camps. Upon arrival to the United States, Hmong women found themselves overloaded with freedom and the option to say “no.” As the younger generation became more educated and assimilated to western notions of choice, Hmong women began to regard the old courtship ways, specifically bridal kidnapping and rape, as inappropriate, archaic, and illegal according to United States law.¹¹² The passing of Title IX, the 1972 Congressional ban of discrimination in higher education, continued the wave of the sexual revolution, and Hmong youth recently settled in the United States were in the center of the action. Hmong girls, raised in poverty in Thai refugee camps, now had educational opportunities never afforded to them in Laos.¹¹³ Kao Kalia Yang, born in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp in 1980, immigrated to Minnesota with her family in 1987. Yang learned about education opportunities available to her in the United States from aid workers in Ban Vinai. She now holds advanced degrees from Columbia University and helps other immigrants learn English. She is just one of thousands of Hmong women who seized every educational opportunity offer to them in their new homeland.¹¹⁴

Western education began the demise of the acceptance of Hmong bridal kidnappings. Of the 300,000 Hmong processed through refugee camps, less than one percent of women could read or write.¹¹⁵ Rarely did a Hmong woman in Laos receive an education; only the most elite families could afford to educate their daughters. In the

¹¹² Faderman and Xiong, 128; Spencer Sherman, “Lost Tribe of the Central Valley,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 15, 1985, accessed October 4, 2014, http://infoweb.newsbank.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_product=NewsBank&p_theme=aggregated5&p_action=doc&p_docid=0EB4ED4061759CD1&p_docnum=1&p_queryname=5; Long, 78-80.

¹¹³ Foner, 1026.

¹¹⁴ Yang, 1-3, 91-2, 123.

¹¹⁵ Cha, 171.

United States, the older generation of refugee women had difficulty becoming self-reliant, while their younger, western-educated daughters challenged the core belief that they were destined to merely be passive and compliant creatures.¹¹⁶ Many young women pressed their parents for the opportunity to go to college. They saw the advantages of an education and wanted to delay marriage. Younger girls in Hmong families saw the struggle of their older sisters who had entered into marriage at a young age. Seeing the challenges of young couples instilled the idea that life had more to offer than just marriage. Hmong girls did not just delay marriage, but viewed it much differently than their mothers did.¹¹⁷ They saw education as holding more value and marriage as an interruption to academic opportunities. They saw their American counterparts finish high school and go to college. By 1986, only seven percent of Hmong in the United States said they still supported polygamy, compared with more than one-third in Laos.¹¹⁸

Although many younger generation Hmong assimilated quickly to the western idea of courtship, others found it difficult to grasp. Once regarded as tradition, most Hmong now saw bridal kidnapping and rape in the western point of view, as a crime under United States law. However, some generations of Hmong men and boys lived in such tightly insulated ethnic enclaves that they had no true understanding of how different United States culture varied from Hmong culture in Laos. By contrast, through mainstream western education, many Hmong girls and boys eagerly adapted to western

¹¹⁶ Faderman and Xiong, 129.

¹¹⁷ Lo, interview.

¹¹⁸ William H. Meredith and George P. Rowe, "Changes in Hmong Refugee Marital Attitudes in America," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, and Amos S. Deinard, (Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies, 1986), 127.

customs of dating, clothing, and socializing. This reduced the acceptance of bridal kidnapping or forced marriage amongst the younger generation.

Older generation Hmong resisted the idea of a formal education. A “good girl” for first-generation Hmong meant going on very few outings, always with her mother, even on dates. A good girl did only what pleased her parents. Ideally she dropped out of school to marry and have babies by the age of seventeen. Only fifty percent of first-generation Hmong girls graduated from high school. To do so meant challenging the focus of her existence—having children.¹¹⁹ The younger generation of girls, especially the younger sisters, challenged this. As the first generation of girls grew up and became mothers, the definition of a good girl shifted; from a subservient and obedient wife, to an educated and independent woman. The connection between American high schools in Thai processing centers and the immersion into American culture in mainstream American cannot be overlooked. While there may have been a lag in one generation, by the second generation a huge shift had occurred.¹²⁰

Case Studies of Bridal Kidnappings in the United States

Education and an understanding of American laws and customs allowed for many Hmong girls to resist marriages they would have been forced into if still in Laos. Nineteen-year-old “Ploa” had come from a well-to-do family in Laos and received an education there and in France before resettling to Seattle in 1979. Kidnapped in a bridal

¹¹⁹ Cha, 171-172; Bic Ngo, “Contesting ‘Culture:’ The Perspectives of Hmong American Female Students on Early Marriage,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, vol. 33 no. 2 (June 2002): 171. Accessed November 2, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3196172>.

¹²⁰ Coulson and Melhorn, 48.

abduction in 1980, her suitor held her under Hmong tradition, which included rape, for three days in hopes of initiating marriage negotiations. He viewed the experience as the beginning of their traditional Hmong engagement, whereas she regarded it as the western definition of kidnapping and rape. After three days, Ploa returned to her family's home where the elders of both parties began negotiations for the bridal price. The girl adamantly refused to marry the boy, stating that she had known him since childhood in Laos and never liked him. Her parents pushed for her to comply as her refusal would cause a deep rift between the two families. She still refused and threatened to go to the police and charge the boy with rape if they continued to push her into the union. The charge may have led to the boy's family's deportation. This halted the wedding negotiations and she fled to the East Coast and married another Hmong man of her choosing. Close geographic ties held great importance within Hmong clans, and Ploa's abandonment left her family shattered. In Laos, the furthest a girl would have moved was the next village over. For a girl to move across the country to avoid marriage and leave her family was unheard of in Laos. This signified not only her rejection of the forced marriage but also independence. In Laos, she would have never been permitted to protest, let alone leave, a marriage negotiation. Her father accepted blame for Ploa's unacceptable behavior, as he lacked control over his daughter. A permanent strain remained between Ploa's family and the boy's family.

The boy who kidnapped Ploa may have had genuine intentions, but because of the restrictions and expected behaviors of Hmong during courtship he was unable to know whether Ploa expressed genuine rejections. Traditionally, Ploa had to resist his

kidnapping and sexual advances towards her. Any good Hmong girl would have been adamant in her objections to preserve her virtue. In turn he had to act forceful in his pursuit of her. Approaching the courtship with a traditional mindset, he disregarded Ploa's objection as playing the role of a good Hmong girl. Ploa experienced rape as defined under United States law and her western viewpoint. She protested during the incident but due to a cultural miscommunication, he thought his actions commenced wedding negotiations.¹²¹

Another case of rape within the American-Hmong community involved a fourteen-year-old girl, Joua, and a nineteen-year-old boy, Poa. Their mothers knew each other from Laos, but the children had never met until they began attending high school together in the United States. One day, Poa offered Joua a ride home along with one of her older male cousins. The presence of the male cousin made it appropriate for her to accept the ride. No good Hmong girl should have been in the presence of a non-relative male. Poa dropped off the cousin first, and then he drove Joua to a remote location where he raped her. She escaped from him, and the police picked her up as they noticed her torn clothing. They took her to the hospital where she had an examination for sexual assault and confirmed to authorities that she had been raped. The police arrested Poa and charged him with sexual assault.¹²²

¹²¹ Donnelly, 142-144.

¹²² Beth L. Goldstein, "Resolving Sexual Assault: Hmong and the American Legal System," in *The Hmong in Transition*, ed. Glenn L. Hendricks, Bruce T. Downing, and Amos S. Deinard, (Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies, 1986), 135-137.

Several conflicts emerged between the families of Joua and Pao. Within Hmong culture, rape is dealt with as an internal matter. In Laos, the village leader held responsibility for settling conflicts.¹²³ In Laos, the rapist's family would offer financial compensation to the girl's family along with an apology. The girl's family accepted the money as a substitute for the bride price for their daughter, as she no longer held her virtue, and it would be hard to find a man willing to marry her after a rape. In this case, Pao's family refused to offer the money; they claimed that since Joua had involved the police she had rejected long-established Hmong practices, they did not have to follow tradition. Joua's parents regarded their daughter as a victim of violent rape in the western definition; Pao never intended on pursuing their daughter as a bride. This was an act of sexual assault. Fearing prosecution, Pao now claimed that he had not raped Joua at all, he simply tried to commence marriage negotiations. After more than a year of legal proceedings, a judge sentenced Pao to eighteen months of probation.

Both Joua and Pao had been in the United States for four years at the time of the incident and lived within tightly bound Hmong families where none of their parents, or any of the elders, read or spoke English. But they both attended public high schools where American social norms clearly conflicted with Hmong courtship ways. Surrounded by traditional Hmong values and an aggressive male American society, Pao became what anthropologist Dr. Beth L. Goldstein referred to as "culturally disoriented." Unclear as to

¹²³ Montemayor.

what defined inappropriate behavior, he anticipated validation from his American peers, not legal punishment.¹²⁴

Joua was Americanized after four years in the United States. She had placed a high value on herself based upon her good performance in school and her physical appearance reflected that of a typical 1980s American teenage girl. She received contradictory responses from her American rape counselors and her Hmong male elders. The counselors validated her anger and fears over the incident. In sharp contrast, the male elders blamed her for causing a rift between the two families. They blamed her for failing to control her anger and for involving the American legal system in what they viewed as a private matter that should have been settled among the elders. Just like marriage that strengthens and unites families and clans, they also viewed rape as a problem between not just the victim and the perpetrator, but as between the two families. The individual's experience, no matter how traumatic, affected the community as a whole.¹²⁵ Rape reform laws in the mid-1970s focused on validation of the victim. Rape crisis centers provided services to victims and worked as advocates to help them through the legal process. Many of these centers offered bilingual language services to help all victims. Additionally, rape centers launched campaigns to bring awareness to the issue of rape.¹²⁶ The aforementioned cases occurred at a time when the issue of rape received a great deal of public awareness. The sexual revolution, lifting of limitations for education, and the

¹²⁴ Goldstein, 135-140.

¹²⁵ Goldstein, 139-141.

¹²⁶ Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 90, 101, 108-9.

public's awareness of the anti-rape movement dovetailed with the arrival of the Hmong into American society. The cases of Ploa and Joua exemplify how changes with American culture directly affected Hmong women and culture and challenged gender roles. Young women refused to comply with situations that they did not agree with. Just one-generation prior in Laos, women had no ability to object.

Cultural Defense as a Legal Tactic

The case of Joua and Poa exemplify what the American legal system regarded as a “cultural defense,” behaviors or attitudes widely accepted within one culture that drastically conflicted with American laws and social ideals. The “cultural defense,” or as called by attorneys, “cultural evidence,” was rarely used and considered a far-reaching defense strategy.¹²⁷ Alameda County Assistant Public Defender Michael Ogul explained, “Problems for the attorney raising the cultural defense . . . include proving that the defendant's explanation is a valid belief or custom in the culture where he grew up and proving that the defendant did believe or practice the custom.”¹²⁸ Cultural defense argued that a person raised in a foreign culture could not be held responsible for his/her behavior because of its acceptance in their country or culture of origin. Even if the behavior is in extreme violation of United States law, a person was not held accountable. The tactic of cultural defense rarely led to acquittal; the best possible outcome usually resulted in a reduced sentence. Crimes defended under the cultural defense tactic typically included special circumstances and the person charged, although technically guilty, may not have

¹²⁷ Oliver.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

fully understood the severity of the crime committed. Classifying one's defense as cultural defense did not excuse the behavior, it merely acknowledged that their perspective may need consideration.

The actions of Kong Moua and his defense team exemplify cultural defense in American legal proceedings. In 1986 twenty-one-year-old Moua made his first attempt to kidnap eighteen-year-old Xieng Xiong, the girl he hoped to marry. During this attempt, her parents refused to allow her to leave the house. Shortly thereafter, Moua and two friends drove to Fresno Community College in search of Xiong, and made a second attempt to kidnap her. Moua and his friends found Xiong at work in the student finance office and took her to Moua's station wagon where they forced her into the vehicle. They took her to Moua's cousin's house and followed the rituals of a traditional Hmong bridal abduction, which included raping Xiong. Xiong's American friends and college classmates saw the incident and called the police.¹²⁹ A few days later the police discovered Xiong at Moua's home and asked her if she wanted to leave. She declined, claimed Moua as her husband, and stated that she wanted to stay with him. A few days later she returned home and filed kidnapping and rape charges against Moua. The prosecutor faced a dilemma; if he took the case to trial by jury they would not understand the inconsistencies in both parties' actions and statements and Moua would face a harsh sentence for what he saw as a "mistake." Ultimately, the judge dropped the rape and

¹²⁹ Oliver, Alison Dundes Renteln, *The Cultural Defense*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 126-127. <http://books.google.com/books?id=zyWr3dSXUrIC&pg=PA127&lpg=PA127&dq=kong+moua+rape&source=bl&ots=EhfDVkxoMc&sig=5DqW0VbhPqkIMmPNRmzInNvLGc8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=01hRVJX0Ks-vogSP5oL4BA&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=kong%20moua%20rape&f=false>.

kidnapping charges and Moua pled guilty to a lesser charge of false imprisonment. He served a ninety-day sentence and paid a fine of \$1000, with \$900 paid to Xiong as reparation.

This case serves as an example of the cultural disconnect between marriage rituals in Laos and in the United States. Xiong and her family regarded the incident as rape and kidnapping. They did not want their daughter to marry Moua and rejected all his previous advances towards her. They saw nothing in the case that resembled what they defined as courtship. In sharp contrast, Moua's family considered Xiong as a willing participant in a centuries-old practice of courtship. They genuinely believed that she wanted to marry their son and supported his actions.¹³⁰ Young Hmong women changed how they regarded marriage once in the United States, and often so did their parents. Early exposure to American education and customs in refugee camps introduced all generations of Hmong to western ideas of courtship, like dating that allowed a woman to choose her spouse, a decision previously made by her male elders. Although multiple generations of Hmong immigrated to the United States, sharp contrasts remained between younger and older people. Xiong attended college and this exposure to education connected to her opposition to old-world kidnapping traditions.

With Hmong culture requiring even a willing girl to protest by saying "no," how could Moua understand Xiong's objections? If he had responded to her protests, his peers

¹³⁰ Oliver; Renteln, 126-7.

would have seen him as “not brave enough” and “weak.”¹³¹ The Hmong marriage protocol prevented clear consent from occurring. These cultural requirements made it impossible for him, or any other Hmong man, to decipher actual objections from willing acceptance of the advances.¹³² The introduction of American norms overlapped with old-world Hmong traditions with disastrous results.

The most effective way of dealing with cases involving cultural misunderstandings was through education and highly publicized court cases. Michael R. Yamaki, a third-generation Japanese-American criminal defense attorney, said that he encountered too many cases where the male perpetrators had no idea that they had committed a crime until they had been arrested and charged. They asked him, “What is the problem here? How can they put me in jail for this?” Yamaki explained “[a]s they start going to court and start getting carted off to jail . . . it gets the word out.” The hope was that if a few cases were publicized, that the entire community would see what behavior was considered unacceptable.¹³³ Education through refugee assistance programs and community support groups found an important, and permanent, place within the new Hmong culture in the United States. Younger generations delicately blend homeland traditions with western culture, creating a new approach to honoring their ancestral traditions. Some reports inaccurately claimed that Indochinese refugees adapted to

¹³¹ Alan Dershowitz, “‘Marriage by Capture’ Runs Into Laws of Rape,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 1985, accessed October 4, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/154259308/61D73351E41D4A68PQ/1?accountid=10358>.

¹³² Renteln, 128.

¹³³ Oliver.

American culture at remarkable rates; these statements were baseless and exaggerated.¹³⁴ In 1980, Vu Ker, president of the Lao-Hmong community in San Diego, said that in reality less than 2% of Hmong possessed the tools to fully adjust to American culture. His duties paralleled those of a village chief in Laos. As Ker told *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Robert Montemayor, “it is hard to change entire lives . . . our cultures are so different.”¹³⁵

Conclusion

In the four decades since the first wave of Hmong refugees arrived in the United States, much has changed in regards to ideas on marriage and education. Many first-generation Hmong women are college educated and independent from the domination of male elders. Many find their western goals and aspirations wholly supported by their mothers. Chong Lo, a twenty seven-year-old college graduate, explained that her mother found the old traditions of marriage and misogyny to be unacceptable. Her mother told her that she no longer feels tethered to her father for support and stated, “if your dad don’t want me I don’t care.” She feels that because her children received education and now have successful careers that they can take care of her. This signals a shift in not only the younger generation, but also in the older generation of women. Lo and her mother expressed independence the same way that Ploa, Joua, and Xiong did; they rejected long-standing, male-dominated Hmong social norms for new, American versions that better suited their lives. Lo emphasized that she and her friends were “brought up to love

¹³⁴ Sherman.

¹³⁵ Montemayor.

ourselves more” than their mothers. Lo explained that although bridal kidnappings are no longer accepted in the United States, getting married is in a way like being kidnapped. When you marry, you leave your birth family for your husband’s family, so in a way, you are being kidnapped.¹³⁶ Her view on marriage is a hybrid of old-world traditions complemented by her upbringing in western society. American education that began decades ago in Thai refugee camps gave women independence unknown in Laos.

The legacy of traditional Hmong marriage changed and evolved as they endured vast political and geographic changes. The changes that occurred after resettlement in the United States were just part of the continuous journey of the Hmong. Although many old traditions were lost, new traditions emerged that continued to support the diversity and complexity of the Hmong as they strived and thrived in the United States. Marriage rituals changed, but through education the next generations will have awareness of their legacy. Where education led to the demise of marriage traditions, it is also with education that the Hmong will continue as a unique and critical part of American history and culture. Education closed the door on some old traditions, but opened up so many more.

¹³⁶ Lo, interview.

What is a Good Girl?
The Changing Views on Early Marriage and Education
in the Hmong Community

The definition of a Hmong “good girl” underwent dramatic changes in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In Laos, and the first two decades in the United States, Hmong parents defined a “good girl” as obedient, subservient, and compliant to marriage arrangements; consistent with the traditional roles held by Hmong women in Laos. In just a few decades the definition of a good girl shifted to include finishing high school, attending college, and delaying marriage and children. Old-world traditions were not completely abandoned, but now included more options for women. In Laos, most Hmong girls married between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Marriages were typically arranged by male clan elders and used to strengthen alliances between clans. Girls held no power to object and oftentimes found themselves the victim of physical, sexual, and mental abuse by their sometimes decades-older husband. After the first wave of Hmong refugees immigrated to the United States in 1975, marriage traditions persisted, still without objection, in the male-dominated Hmong communities. The early marriages of Hmong girls hindered their ability to pursue education, provide financial support to their families, and fully assimilate into American culture and society. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, only fifty percent of Hmong girls graduated from high school, because a good girl dropped out of high school to marry and have children by age seventeen. The

lack of education prohibited young women from providing for their families. With the burden of having and caring for children so great, most girls, although married, found themselves relying on public assistance or in low-paying, dead-end jobs.¹³⁷

In Laos, respectable Hmong girls were brought up to honor their elders, care for household duties, and raise their children; these contributions did not require a formal education, as they were taught from their mothers and other clan women. These attributes were highly regarded by future husbands and in-laws. Once in the United States, formal educational opportunities introduced more options for young Hmong women outside of the home. But many Hmong girls, who saw marriage as an escape from their overbearing parents, only found themselves then under the thumb of a domineering mother-in-law. Whether a girl continued her education after marriage was left to the discretion of her husband and his family.¹³⁸ Whereas in Laos, a young wife and mother had never had any formal education, young women in the United States had the opportunity to continue their education once married. After marriage, a bride still moved into the home of her husband and his parents, but some in-laws allowed, and even encouraged, their daughter-in-law to continue her formal education.

Hmong families who immigrated to the United States came with multiple generations and children ranged in age from infants to teenagers. The lines between first, second, and even third-generation Hmong were complicated and difficult to define. The

¹³⁷ Ray Hutchinson and Miles McNall, "Early Marriage in a Hmong Cohort," *Journal of Marriage and Family* Vol. 56 no. 3 (August 1994): 579-582; Meridith and Rowe, 128.

¹³⁸ Jack C. Westman, *Breaking the Adolescent Parent Cycle: Valuing Fatherhood and Motherhood* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), 281-283.

oldest Hmong to resettle often clung to the hope of a return to Laos. Many never learned English and lived primarily in tightly insulated ethnic enclaves in the large Hmong communities established in Minnesota and California's Central Valley. Their children, often already parents themselves, were in many cases more open to assimilation and interested in formal education. They most likely received some exposure to American education in the Thai camps. It is the youngest generation that came in such great numbers and wide age ranges, infants to teenagers, where the generation disparities were most prevalent. Children had the largest contrast in their educational exposure. A child who came to the United States as an infant grew up to attend school from age five through high school, whereas, their older sibling, may have had only the twenty-weeks of education in a PASS school in a Thai camp. The lines of definition between the multitudes of generations of Hmong were fluid and not easily interpreted. It is within these younger generations that the most changes occurred.¹³⁹

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX and ended discrimination in schools based on race and gender. In 1975, when the first Hmong resettled in the United States, they entered at the peak of huge change for women's education and employment opportunities. Rooted in the civil rights movements of the 1960s, fueled by feminist movements and protests of the Vietnam War, by the mid-1970s women had more rights and opportunities in the United States. The Secret War fought by the Hmong for the CIA in Laos, sparked protests by feminists half a world away in the United States, ultimately led to more opportunities and improved lives once resettled. These protests broke down

¹³⁹ Pfelger, 1985), 1-4; Yang, *The Latehomecomer*, 78-80.

gender barriers established centuries ago. A new female identity emerged and old roles of masculine and feminine were challenged. Most American women were now employed, and they shattered the long-established ideal that a woman's place was in the home. American women also delayed marriage and having children, and this reflected their educational and employment opportunities. The proportion of twenty to twenty-four-year-old women in the workforce increased from fifty percent in 1964 to sixty-one percent in 1973, and eighty-six percent of women with college educations were employed. Young Hmong women were first exposed to this beginning with PASS schools set up by the U.S. Department of Education in Thai camps. Upon arrival in the United States, these young Hmong women had no boundaries that prohibited them from perusing formal educations. The actions of the Hmong in Laos directly contributed to improved educational opportunities in the United States.¹⁴⁰

Hmong refugees emigrated from Thai camps to the United States well into the 1990s. Many American Hmong men regarded these younger girls as more suitable brides than girls in the United States, as they retained more old world traditions. Because many came from rural Lao and Thai villages and lacked any formal education, they posed little threat to the disruption of marriage traditions. With little understanding of American culture, the later immigrants replaced the older, savvier, girls as bride material. Older Hmong men, eager for a more compliant bride, also brought over these young Hmong girls from Lao villages as second wives, a return to old-world polygamy. The marriage practices continued unnoticed by mainstream society as Hmong marriages were purely

¹⁴⁰ Chafe, 430-436; Pfelger, 1-4.

cultural. They rarely used legal channels to obtain marriage licenses. This made tracking the rate of Hmong marriages difficult and dissolution very complicated.

What was a “Good Girl?”

Men defined what it meant to be a good Hmong girl as seen through the traditions of marriage, views on sexuality, and a women’s status in society. Hmong men created the parameters for women as a way to suit their desires and needs. Until resettlement in the United States, women had no means to challenge these boundaries.¹⁴¹ Traditions taught that being a good Hmong girl was the path to being a good Hmong wife and daughter-in-law.¹⁴² A good subservient daughter-in-law cleaned the home, cooked all the meals, and also had many children and preserved her husband’s clan lines.¹⁴³

Protecting one’s sexuality also defined a good girl. In Laos, girls contributed to farm labor by the age of five or six and this coincided with modest dress. Clothing had to cover all parts of a girl’s body, specifically their genital area. Mothers wrapped their daughters in a symbolic cloth that covered both their buttocks and front. This prevented a man from seeing the outline of a girl’s genitals, even through her clothing. Protecting a girl’s sexuality ensured she did not bring shame to the family, as a girl’s virginity was most important, and that she could be married to a desirable suitor.¹⁴⁴

At mealtimes, both women and girls ate second and only after the men had been satisfied. As a young girl in Laos, Gao Nou recounted going hungry even though food

¹⁴¹ Her and Buley-Meissner, 104.

¹⁴² Meridith and Rowe, 128.

¹⁴³ Dia, 178; Lo, 168-169.

¹⁴⁴ Pranee Liamputtong Rice, *Hmong Women and Reproduction* (Westport: Bergin and Garvey, 2000), 25-28.

was abundant. She frequently lost her appetite as the only meat left was scraped down to the bone, with only her uncle's crooked teeth marks remaining. The leftovers reminded her of her low status and left her with a fury inside that made her want to shout at her parents. But she kept her anger to herself, because as a girl, it was useless to protest.¹⁴⁵

In the 1990s, more flexibility emerged for Hmong girls in the United States and allowed for navigation between Hmong and American culture, but with some restrictions. These changes reflected two decades of education and exposure to American culture. A girl could go out to parties but her mom had to go with her. This allowed her to participate in typical teenage activities but under strict supervision. The fear of being viewed as promiscuous was the pinnacle of concern for Hmong parents. Anna explained, "My sister . . . She was a good girl. . . . she did everything my parents wanted her to do. And everywhere she went, like if a guy wanted to take her to the movies, my mom would go with her. So it'd be her, and her mom, and him, and my little brothers, you know."¹⁴⁶ Anna's sister engaged in typical American teenager activities but still remained a good girl within the boundaries of the Hmong community. Anna's sister represented how younger generation girls balanced life in both American and Hmong culture.

Views on Marriage Changed

In Laos, early marriage was viewed as beneficial as it contributed to more children and they were regarded as vital to Hmong society.¹⁴⁷ Early cultural marriage of girls between twelve and seventeen contrasted sharply with the average marriage age of

¹⁴⁵ Her and Buley-Meissner, 101-104.

¹⁴⁶ Ngo, 171.

¹⁴⁷ Walker-Moffatt, 116-117.

American women and men.¹⁴⁸ According to the United States Census, in 1980 the average age of marriage for a woman was 23.5 years and a man was 25 years. The age of marriage continued to rise to 25 for women and 26.5 for men in 1990.¹⁴⁹ Marrying young and forfeiting education had deep economic impacts on Hmong girls. Not only did they lack education, but they also failed to gain the skills needed to secure good-paying jobs to support their growing families.

Although the most profound changes for Hmong women occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States, views on women's roles and education began to change in Laos in the early 1960s through 1975. During those years, significant funds were earned from fighting the Secret War in Laos, financed by the CIA. These funds allowed Hmong communities to finance building schools and hospitals, and many Hmong women worked as teachers and nurses. This period of change abruptly ended in 1975 when the United States pulled out of Southeast Asia. But the seed of change and opportunity was planted. Although many women then spent the next decade of their lives running from the Lao communist regime and living in refugee camps, education emerged as a foundation for success and new freedoms in the United States. The PASS schools set up in Thai camps further contributed to the educational opportunities for women. A Hmong woman, who settled in North Carolina at age eight in 1982, explained how she knew "education was the only key to a better life in America." She also expressed her awareness that "had I

¹⁴⁸ Cooper and Cooper, 26.

¹⁴⁹ U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010), accessed February 9, 2015 <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/marriage/data/acs/ElliottetalPAA2012figs.pdf>.

been in Laos . . . as a female in a large family, I would not have had an opportunity to gain an education.”¹⁵⁰

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Hmong girls in the United States who dropped out of school to marry and have children frequently were trapped in a life reliant on public assistance and low-paying jobs. As early as 1981, just six years after the first Hmong arrived in the United States, the Reagan Administration expressed grave concerns over the disproportionately high drop-out rates of Southeast Asian refugees. By 1982, more than twenty-five percent of refugees in California still took welfare payments, more than double the national average. By 1984, 140,000 of the 350,000 Southeast Asian refugees in California relied on welfare, nearly fifty percent. In 1987, one refugee explained that although he was eligible to work in legitimate jobs, the pay was so low that he made more on welfare. Most Hmong men and women had job skills, but these were primarily agricultural, and few jobs existed to hone their skills in urban America. As for a young Hmong girl with children, even if she secured a job, typically as a seamstress or in agriculture, finding reliable childcare proved a challenge. In the late 1980s, many Hmong women worked as seamstresses from home, but the pay amounted to little more than \$10,000 a year. Refugees found themselves victimized and exploited in working conditions. One woman reported earning \$45 cash for eighty hours of sewing in a shop owned by another Asian immigrant. In California, like in Laos, when children were old enough to work many were taken with their parents to work from sun-up to

¹⁵⁰ Pao Lor, “A Hmong Professional Woman’s Reflections and Perspectives on the Influences Affecting the Changing Roles of Hmong American Women,” *Journal of Cultural Diversity* Vol., 20, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 40-45.

sundown in fields. This further disrupted educational opportunities for the younger generation.¹⁵¹

In their first decade in the United States, Hmong girls who dropped out of high school to marry and have children received praise from their families and community as they had moved into the highest social role they could hold: the role as wife and mother. Not all young brides dropped out. Some tried to stay in school, but faced harsh social judgments from American teachers. Many Hmong girls responded to this and disconnected from the school and ultimately dropped out. In 1988, a survey of 129 Hmong students, 65 males and 64 females, in the ninth grade in the St. Paul Public School District showed that only six percent of the female students were married. Each year the same students were surveyed and the number of students married rose to twenty-one percent in the sophomore year, twenty-nine percent by junior year, and fifty-three percent by senior year in 1992. Most had given birth to at least one child, but yet they remained in school. This reflected a shift in both girls, and their families, as the husband and his family supported the girl's education. By senior year only a few of the boys were married, as most girls married older men. This survey indicated that while fifty-three percent of Hmong girls married while still in high school, forty-seven percent did not.

¹⁵¹ Ronald Takaki, "Asian Newcomers Who 'Get Ahead So Fast' May Be Far Behind Where They Started," *Los Angeles Times* August 20, 1989, accessed February 6, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/1152178999/D4C3B1C4BB1E4DC2PQ/1?accountid=10358>; Penelope McMillan, "Indochinese Refugees a Costly Load for Counties," *Los Angeles Times* September 16, 1984, accessed February 6, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/153948772/9CB5C6C64744B10PQ/1?accountid=10358>; Mark Arax, "Many Refugees Work While Getting Welfare," *Los Angeles Times* February 9, 1987, accessed February 6, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/hnplatimes/docview/810462118/4EE58F56623E4E7CPQ/1?accountid=10358>.

Additionally, although the realities of being married in high school often overshadowed one's goals, many Hmong girls who were married had the same educational aspirations as their non-married Hmong peers, but the likelihood they achieved those goals was lower than their non-married counterparts.¹⁵²

A Hmong American girl named Mary expressed deep regret for getting pregnant at eighteen. Although in a Hmong cultural marriage, she found it difficult to finish high school while juggling the responsibilities of being a wife and mother. Lisa, pregnant at fifteen, explained being "scared and confused" on becoming a parent so young. She cautioned, "...be responsible for what might happen" to your educational opportunities.¹⁵³ Their regrets reflected a cultural shift in the perception on early marriage and having children while young. Mary and Lisa saw their early parenthood as a hurdle that made continuing their educations very difficult. A 1986 survey of 134 Hmong living in Omaha, Nebraska showed that eighty-seven percent agreed that a woman should wait until she is over the age of eighteen to marry. After less than ten years in the United States, perceptions on when women should marry had already changed.¹⁵⁴

Hmong youth's views on marriage sharply contrasted with old-world traditions. But drastic changes in marriage practices came when parents changed their viewpoints. One Hmong woman explained how, in 1990, at age seventeen, her parents arranged her marriage, one month before she was to graduate high school. Although she was

¹⁵² Hutchinson and McNall, 584-585; Stacey J. Lee, "Exploring and Transforming the Landscape of Gender and Sexuality: Hmong American Teenaged Girls," *Race, Gender, and Class* Vol. 8 no. 1 (2001): 37, 44.

¹⁵³ Ji Hyun Lim, "Teen Pregnancy: A Tradition," *Asianweek* March 7, 2001, accessed February 6, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/367568189/6EA75EB44204BCEP/Q/1?accountid=10358>.

¹⁵⁴ Meredith and Rowe, 117-126.

devastated, she agreed as she was already viewed as an “old-maiden” in Hmong society and to “save face” for her parents. Even though she regarded herself as “All-American” and aspired to attend college the following fall, she put the needs of her family before her own. When asked if she would allow either of her daughters to marry young she replied, “Absolutely not. Times have changed.”¹⁵⁵

Parent’s perceptions on marriage changed rather dramatically by the late 1980s and early 1990s. Experiences by Hmong parents in the United States, taught them education was the ticket for upward mobility in society and economic stability. Educated Hmong in the camps had as easier time finding a country to resettle. Agricultural jobs were physically challenging and only seasonal, and without education, they could only get low-paying jobs. Girls were encouraged to postpone marriage in favor of education.¹⁵⁶ In less than two decades the general consensus began to favor education over marriage. Hmong girls attended college and girls who married young were encouraged to remain in school. For example, Jessica Lee Lo was born in Laos in the late 1960s and immigrated to the United States in 1976. She finished college and two years later met her husband. As the mother of three Hmong-American daughters, she viewed her children as assets and saw education as tool for their success. She valued education as a top priority over all else. She believed that education afforded her children great opportunities and preserved their Hmong culture.

¹⁵⁵ Lor, 43.

¹⁵⁶ Ngo, 170.

From 1975 through the early 1990, many dramatic changes occurred within American Hmong culture regarding marriage. But some families were more reluctant to change than others, and this created an overlap within the culture between those parents who resisted change and those who embraced it. Some girls married very young and some delayed marriage until after completion of college. The lines between generations remained blurred.

Different Reasons Girls Married Young

In addition to tradition, there were other reasons girls married young. Many felt left out if they were not married. Neng Lee and her family settled in Stockton, California in 1985 after resettlement from a refugee camp in Thailand. She married in 1991 at seventeen to escape a lonely home life as her older sisters had married and left. Neng finished high school but she and her husband found it difficult to find work after having several children. Fortunately, her mother-in-law generously watched her children while she went to work. She regretted getting married so young and wished she had waited until she was older. She explained, “Education must come first, no matter how good other things look.”¹⁵⁷ Ly Thao came to the United States in 1979 at age seven. At sixteen and in the eighth grade she married after being kidnapped in a traditional Hmong ceremony. She had her first child shortly after. Her husband and his family supported her education but after the second child was born she had to quit school. Though she was kidnapped under Hmong tradition, her in-laws also supported her education. This signaled a shift in their perception on the importance of education, and the overlap of traditions within

¹⁵⁷ Coulson and Melhorn, 62, 65-66.

multiple generations, even though they still supported old-world marriage traditions. Eventually she returned to school and had a long-term goal of becoming a nurse. Her experience of familial support of her education signals a shift in elders views on marriage.¹⁵⁸ Her family and her husband's family supported her education. Hmong girls married under a variety of circumstances. Some admitted to not wanting to be left out, as many of their friends had already married.¹⁵⁹

Other reasons existed for a Hmong girl to marry young. Some Hmong girls felt socially uncomfortable and out of place in predominantly white high schools and colleges so they opted to escape through marriage. In the late 1990s, Anna found college to be a painful experience, as one of the few Asian American students on her campus she struggled to gain a sense of belonging and lacked focus on her studies. She felt further isolated, as all three of her roommates were white, and she spent most of her free time in her dorm room. She doubted her ability to succeed academically and saw marriage as an excuse to leave school. Her best friend encouraged her to continue school, and she finished college. She viewed marriage not as a Hmong tradition to please her parents, but as escape from an unhappy situation. Also in the late 1990s, another Hmong college student, Tia, felt rejected at her mostly white university. Although her parents strongly objected, she dropped out during her sophomore year to get married as a way to escape her disappointing college experience. Like Anna, Tia did not look to marry out of compliance with tradition; she used it to escape from school where she felt "kind of

¹⁵⁸ Coulson and Melhorn, eds., 64.

¹⁵⁹ Westman, 283.

stuck.”¹⁶⁰ Tia also explained that she hoped marriage would let her return to the familiarity of the Hmong community. She also chose to get married as she knew it was the only reason her parents would allow her to leave college.¹⁶¹ Anna and Tia both wanted to get married but not because they were compliant and traditional good girls. They sought to escape from uncomfortable social situations.

Bride Price

The bride price in Hmong marriage traditions dated back for centuries. A groom’s family made the payment to the bride’s family. It symbolized the link between the two clans and was also seen as a reflection of a girl’s perceived value. The family of a good girl, one who contributed to her new husband’s family through domestic duties and childrearing, was able to demand more money for her than a girl who was viewed as disobedient or disrespectful. It recognized her parents’ contribution to her rearing and confirmed her virtuous status.¹⁶² In Laos, representatives of the groom and the girl’s parents negotiated the bride price based on guidelines set by local townships. A typical bride price of four fifteen-ounce silver bars, equivalent to \$600 USD, was considered acceptable. Most marriage agreements made after 1972 were in the form of written contracts, as European and American contacts led to increased English literacy in the male village population. Prior to 1972, only around half of all contracts were written. The agreements included provisions for divorce and also prohibited a husband from

¹⁶⁰ Bic Ngo, 178, 180.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 178-180.

¹⁶² Vang and Her, 140.

criticizing a wife's clan of origin. Clauses on how to deal with an unsatisfactory wife, one who did not listen or fulfill her marital obligation of bearing children, were included.¹⁶³

In the United States, the bride price took on a new meaning. The price fluctuated on social status and education and also provided security to parents and assured them that their son-in-law could not easily divorce their daughter. The money symbolized the level of commitment and the price paid was forfeited if the husband initiated the divorce. This shift in meaning of the bride price in the United States reflected the changes in cultural adaptations, as divorces in Laos were extremely rare. The bride price multiplied in the United States; by 2001 it averaged \$6,000 and many Hmong wanted it eliminated, as it was too high. As more Hmong men received educations they had more money to offer for a bride. The bride price escalated as an educated Hmong women held more worth than one without an education. As non-Hmong sometimes misconstrued the bride price as payment for a wife, most financial transactions were conducted in cash to conceal the practice. As many Hmong marriages were only recognized within the culture and not legally binding, the bride price went unnoticed by authorities.¹⁶⁴

Miss Hmong Pageants, held in many different Hmong communities every year in the United States, set the standards for Hmong beauty and culture. The young women who won also commanded the highest bride price. By 2008, many Hmong rejected the bride price as it peaked at nearly \$10,000 and many young men were less willing, or unable, to pay. A national council of Hmong elders that represented eighteen clans in the

¹⁶³ Meredith and Rowe, 122; Lo, *The Promised Land*, 163.

¹⁶⁴ Lo, *The Promised Land*, 163.

United States sought to cap the bride price at \$5,000. Hmong in California's Central Valley saw a decline in the price paid in the last decade.¹⁶⁵ The bride price was oftentimes still paid, but because there was so much negativity associated with it, the parents of the bride frequently gave the new couple the money to help start their new life together. This reflected a change in parents' attitudes on marriage and the bride price.¹⁶⁶

Miss Hmong pageants also reflected a change in attitude towards marriage and education. In the 1980s, most winners were high school girls under age eighteen. By 2007, Miss Hmong typically was a college student in her early twenties. A shift reflected new conceptions of how to be a "good girl." Contrasting the "good girl" of the late 1970s and early 1980s that dropped out of school to marry and have children, now Miss Hmong represented and promoted the importance of education and delaying of marriage.¹⁶⁷

Sandy Vang, a pre-med student at Michigan State University, won Miss Hmong Michigan in 2007. In an interview with *Hmong Times*, she expressed her goal of promoting education and discouraging early marriage. She wanted to work with parents and encouraged children to continue their education. She saw education as the pathway to supporting the Hmong community and the continuing success of the next generation of

¹⁶⁵ Anonymous, "Dowry Tradition Changing for California Hmong," *Asianweek* January 25, 2008. Accessed February 29, 2015.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/367346312/4A-ECCF7C41FE4567PQ/1?accountid=10358>.

¹⁶⁶ MB, "Traditional Hmong Weddings and Marriages," *A Hmong Woman Blog* October 8, 2011. Accessed February 19, 2015. <http://ahmongwoman.com/2011/10/08/traditional-hmong-weddings-and-marriages/>.

¹⁶⁷ Dia, 165.

Hmong.¹⁶⁸ Parents' attitudes towards marriage changed exponentially. In a 2014 study of 202 Hmong parents, twenty-five percent of parents agreed that the ideal age for marriage was now twenty-five.¹⁶⁹

The Complexities of Cultural Marriage

Hmong marriage tradition as practiced in Laos and the United States did not include a legal aspect to the marriage. A traditional cultural marriage ceremony was performed by a mej-koob, a community member who aided in marriage negotiations, who also helped facilitate bride price negotiations. As a member of the clan, the mej-koob helped the families through the marriage process; through rituals and words the marriage was recognized within the Hmong community. Legalization of marriage was not an important aspect of Hmong marriage. Cultural marriages allowed for the continued practice of underage marriage for many years. When a culturally married couple reached the age of eighteen, they were able to then apply for a legal marriage license, but this occurred infrequently.¹⁷⁰ Cultural marriages were highly problematic in the United States, as neither spouse had protection from a legal perspective nor were they eligible for any type of compensation benefit in the case of accident or death. The children also suffered, as they were oftentimes not recognized as true legal beneficiaries of the parent.

¹⁶⁸ Noah Vang, "Interview with Miss Hmong Michigan: Sandy Vang," *Hmong Times* January 1, 2007. Accessed February 19, 2015.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/388947981/6D4D01AED4657PQ/1?accountid=10358>.

¹⁶⁹ Laurie L Meschke and Christina R. Peter, "Hmong American Parents' Views on Promoting Sexual Health," *American Journal of Sexuality Education* Vol. 9 (2014), 318.

¹⁷⁰ Pa Der Vang and Pa Her, "Teenage Marriage Among American Hmong Women," *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* Vol. 24 no. 2 (2014), 151; Pa Der Vang and Matthew Bogenschultz, "Teenage Marriage, and the Socioeconomic Status of Hmong Women," *International Migration* Vol. 52 no. 3 (2011), 147.

Additionally, dissolving a cultural marriage proved extremely difficult as dividing property, retirement accounts, homes, and automobiles, was complex. When a cultural marriage ended, clan leaders decided the distribution of assets. Much like marriage negotiations, the outcome was based on the best interest of the clan, not the individuals. A Hmong woman oftentimes found herself the victim of biased opinions, as the older males of the clan made the decisions regarding the end of a cultural marriage. The dissolution of cultural marriages under the authority of Hmong clan elders often led to unfair distribution of assets and child custody.¹⁷¹ Hmong cultural marriages in the United States remained connected to old-world traditions when they ended as the male elders controlled distribution of assets and children.

In 2006, Minnesota Hmong state senator Moua Mee proposed a Hmong Marriage Bill to legitimize Hmong cultural marriages. The bill met strong opposition from the community. The bill offered the option for a mej-koob to file a legal wedding certificate in addition to performing the cultural marriage. Mee argued that Native American and Hindu cultural marriages were sanctioned by the state and saw the adaptation of legal aspects of marriage as beneficial to the Hmong community.¹⁷² Hmong Minnesota house member Cy Thao opposed the bill and stated that it disrupted long-established marriage traditions. Thao claimed that if the role of the mej-koob changed, it further damaged marriage traditions, as their role was more of a mediator than one who solemnized the

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Lee, "The Hmong Community and Family Law," Minnesota Family Law Website. Accessed February 19, 2015. <http://www.tuftlaw.com/blogs/15-general/160-the-hmong-community-and-family-law>.

¹⁷² Moua Mee, "Hmong Marriage Bill Before Senate," *Asian Pages* March 31, 2002. Accessed February 19, 2015. <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/195815398/E6BF1671184942ABPQ/2?accountid=10358>.

union. He claimed that Hmong cultural marriages were accepted among the parents and the Hmong community so adding a legal aspect was unnecessary. He also insisted that the bill did little to end the cultural marriages between older men and underage girls.¹⁷³ Members of the community found the bill to be “offensive to all ethnic and cultural groups in Minnesota” and “risks the criminalization of Hmong religious rituals involved in marriages by making them directly responsible under the law for any abuses in a Hmong marriage they would bless.”¹⁷⁴ Several Hmong senate members and community organizations gathered enough support and votes and rejected the Hmong marriage bill. Although views on marriage evolved dramatically in a short period of time, retaining traditions was an important cornerstone of Hmong culture in the United States.¹⁷⁵

Older Men Still Needed “Good Girls”

By the 1990s, the younger generation Hmong girls focused less on marriage and more on education and a cultural divide occurred between them and the older generation of Hmong men. Some Hmong men, dissatisfied with Americanized Hmong girls, sought out more suitable “good girls” for marriage. Other men wanted a second, younger, wife to fulfill an emotional or sexual desire left unfulfilled in the first marriage. These men still desired submissive, old-world “good girls” to marry, despite having lived for several

¹⁷³ Lee Ann Schutz, “Solemnization of Marriage,” Minnesota House of Representatives, Public Information Services April 3, 2006. Accessed February 19, 2015.

<http://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hinfo/sessiondaily.asp?storyid=737>.

¹⁷⁴ Ray Murray, “Legislative Bill on Hmong Marriage Ceremonies Clearly Attacks Hmong Cultural Traditions,” op-ed, *Hmong Times Online* June 16, 2006. Accessed February 19, 2015.

<http://www.hmongtimes.com>

</main.asp?SectionID=31&SubSectionID=190&ArticleID=552>.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous, “What’s Going On?” *Hmong Times*, July 1, 2006. Accessed February 19, 2015.

<http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.csus.edu/ethnicnewswatch/docview/389046920/33BCA7CB90D64527PQ/1?accountid=10358>.

decades in the United States. In Laos, many Hmong men traditionally practiced polygamy, a tradition that died out once in the United States because immigration officials refused to allow a man to bring more than one wife. As so many parents encouraged their daughters to receive educations and delay marriage, older Hmong men looked elsewhere for a satisfactory bride. Their solution included a return to Laos and Thailand to find another wife. The new brides had not been exposed to American cultural ideas that focused on educational opportunities and careers. Instead, they retained old-world values not seen since the 1980s in the United States. Older Hmong men who desired compliant women for marriage showed the disparity between older and younger generations in the United States.

Some Hmong husbands in the United States disappeared for weeks to travel to Southeast Asia, and then returned home culturally married to a new second wife. Often younger than his children, brides were frequently not accepted in the new family, and remained isolated from them and the community. In 2007, Bo Thao-Urabe, a Wisconsin advocate for domestic abuse and immigrant populations, reported that while only a “handful of men” have engaged in overseas marriage, it still needed attention. The Hmong Advocates in Wisconsin released a report in 2012 that chronicled the abuses in international marriages. The Hmong community typically opposed men traveling overseas to find a bride, but the practice was not shunned. One report claimed a man was seventy years older than the girl he married. The men can also be deceptive about their true financial situation in the United States. The girl did not really know what his situation was like but it was worth the risk to escape from poverty in a rural village.

First reports of international marriages saw men over age fifty seeking wives in Laos, but more recently, men as young as thirty began to seek brides overseas. In most cases, the men sought second wives to bring home to the United States, but in some cases, “transnational abandonment” or “marry and dump” occurred. Hmong American men married young girls without the intention of sponsoring their immigration to the United States. These girls, abandoned and shamed, were isolated from the community, and left undesirable to all other Hmong men.¹⁷⁶ The change from older to younger men, often born in the United States, who sought out Hmong brides in Laos and Thailand exemplified that as much as things had changed for Hmong women in the United States, many men still retained the desire for old-world traditional girls to marry.

Conclusion

The greatest changes in the Hmong community resulted from women’s education. As parents began to support education over early marriage, the whole community benefited as employment opportunities soared with education. The new Hmong good girl showed respect for her family and culture as through education, she thrived and elevated the lives of those around her. Through all these changes, a new Hmong woman emerged, one who was confident with her place in both American society and within the Hmong community. The goal of girl’s education was to not abandon their Hmongness; to the contrary, most women saw education as a guarantee of the continuation of a Hmong society rich with culture for many generations to come.

¹⁷⁶ Chic Dabby-Chinoy, “Abusive International Marriages: Hmong Advocates Organizing in Wisconsin,” Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence (2012), 8-11. Accessed February 19, 2015. http://www.apiidv.org/files/Abusive.International.Marriages_APIIDV_4.2013.pdf.

What the Future Holds

The year 2015 marked the fortieth year since the first Hmong refugees resettled in the United States. Hmong women in the United States found educational and employment opportunities readily available in the United States, and were often supported by their parents. Marriage and children were delayed in pursuit of higher education and employment and this resulted in improved lives for all generations of a woman's family. Changes occurring in the United States did not require abandonment of all old-world traditions and many still persist today, but these traditions exemplified how American and Hmong cultures complemented each other. Many Hmong woman in the United States objected to forced marriages and challenged old world gender roles, but continued to respect their culture and placed great value on its preservation.

While women made the boldest moves to change their status within the American Hmong community, they also fought hard for preservation of their culture. Education in the United States focuses on assimilation and this threatens to diminish the Hmong language in younger generations. Retention of an evolving Hmong culture and community is vital to future generations. As Portes and Rumbart explain, "children who learn the language and culture of their new country without losing those of the old have a much better understanding of their place in the world." A strong connection to the past and the present will buttress the individual identities of the next generation of Hmong, and connect them to their Hmong communities in the United States.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbart, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 269-274.

The annual Hmong New Years festival, held at the California Exposition fairgrounds each November, is an opportunity for young Hmong men and women to wear traditional dress and celebrate their culture. Each outfit is made by the wearer for that year's festival and includes elaborate embroidered designs into the cloth. An example of cultural blending in Hmong culture was witnessed on many young women, as along with her traditional Hmong clan costume, 5-inch patent leather platform shoes purchased at the local shopping mall adorned her feet. An expression of an independent American identity complimented their commitment to Hmong heritage.

In a November 2014 survey of seven Hmong women enrolled at California State University, Sacramento, all but one student said that their parents wanted college prioritized over marriage.¹⁷⁸ With education as their priority, some even regarded marriage as “not necessary.” Only one student expressed that her mother worried that she would never get married and that her mother said she would forgo receiving a dowry just to ensure her finding a husband. This student, the only one born in Thailand as opposed to California, was slightly older than the other women interviewed. This outlier represents how much the views on marriage and education have changed in a short period of time. The six other interviewees, born in the mid-1990s in California, not only had parental support in receiving higher educations, but also said their parents also discouraged them from marrying too young.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Anonymous, Interviewed by the author, 2014 Hmong New Year Festival, Sacramento, November 27, 2014.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous.

For as much progress has been made, Hmong women still have many challenges. Bridal abductions, although rare, still occur in the United States today. Women cannot hold clan leadership roles and are still regarded as property of their families: first with their birth families, and then after marriage, their husband's family. Because of the perpetual role of male dominance, change must continue to come from women. Although always holding a lower social status than men in Hmong culture, women must continue to persevere forward and reform the Hmong culture to ensure its survival.¹⁸⁰ Caitlin Lee, who came to the United States at age four in 1980, explained that she wanted to teach her children to be American, but also how to be Hmong. Balancing life between two distinct cultures presented itself as one of the greatest challenges of being a Hmong American. Her greatest fear as parent is that they will lose their Hmong culture and identity.¹⁸¹ The ability of a Hmong woman to be independent, pursue education, and have a voice within the community ensures the continuation of a new Hmong culture in the United States.

An abundance of oral histories were utilized in research for this thesis. I am grateful for the generosity of the many women who shared their experiences to help preserve the memory of life in Laos and the future of the Hmong in the United States. The education obtained by Hmong women and girls in the United States led to many changes in the lives of women. These changes led to improved living conditions and elevated social statuses for all family members. These changes should not be seen as a

¹⁸⁰ Nenick Vu, "7 Ways Traditional Hmong Culture is Sexist," *The Hmong Journal* April 5, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2015. <http://hmongjournal.com/details?id=1234571393>.

¹⁸¹ Eric Lindquist, "Hmong Community Tries to Balance Modern Living, Traditions," *La Crosse Tribune* April 11, 2015. Accessed April 11, 2015. http://lacrossetribune.com/news/local/hmong-community-tries-to-balance-modern-living-traditions/article_d2a625f4-c81a-5015-8bf2-26615d5be3c5.html.

loss, but rather as an assurance that the Hmong in America are included the in the past, present, and future.

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