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# The Hmong

## An Introduction to their History and Culture

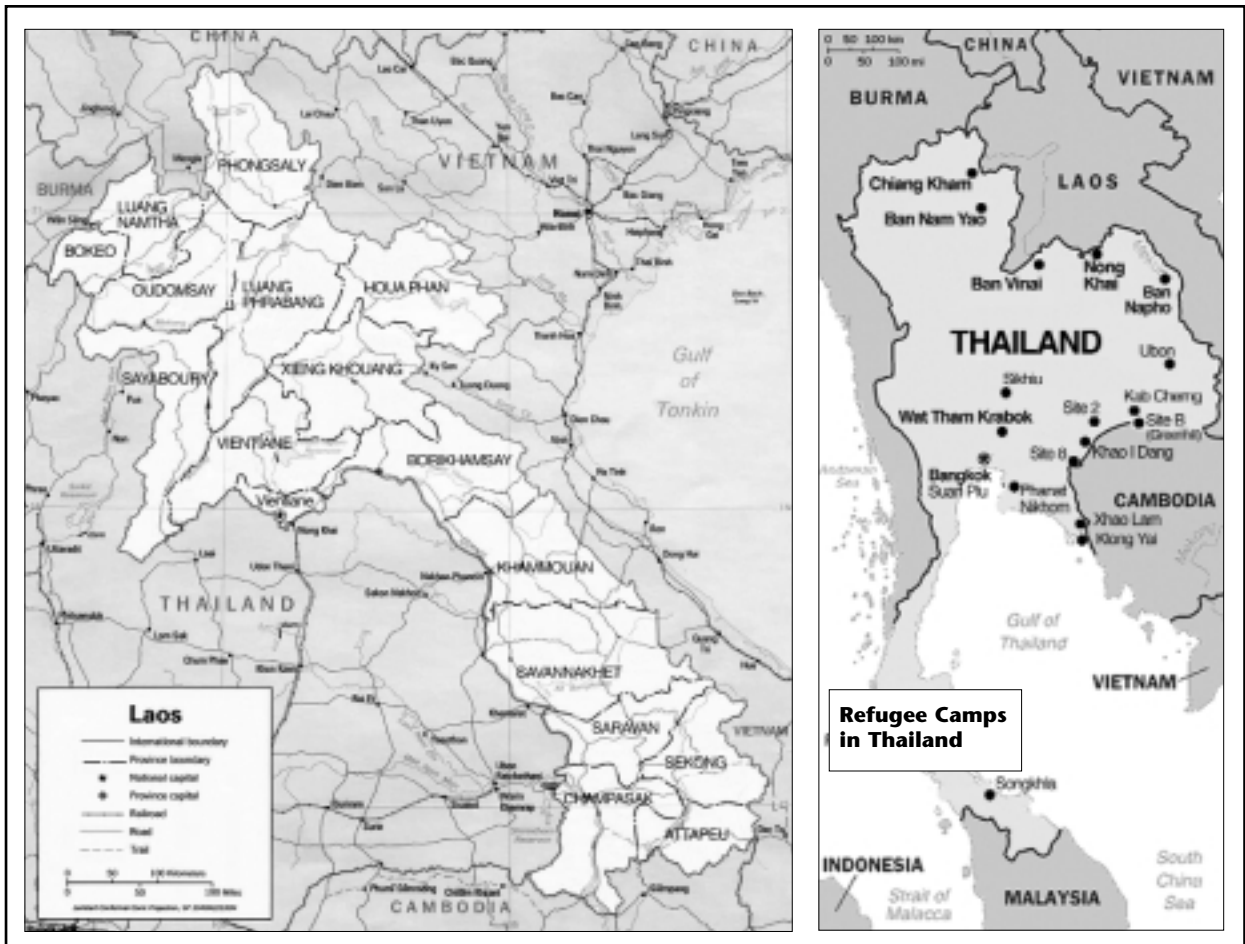
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### **CAL**

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Front cover: Hmong flee war in Laos, crossing the Mekong River to Thai refugee camps.

Back Cover: The Hmong diaspora on a world map.

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## Introduction

In December 2003, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok announced that a large group of Lao Hmong living at Wat Tham Krabok, a temple complex 80 miles north of Bangkok, would be considered for resettlement in the United States. The decision to resettle the Hmong was applauded by U.S. refugee advocacy groups, who had become concerned about conditions at the temple and the possibility that the Thai government would send the Hmong back to Laos.

The Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok are the last large group of Vietnam War-era refugees remaining in Southeast Asia. Their resettlement represents the final phase of a relief and resettlement program that began in 1975, when hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia after the fall of U.S.-supported governments there.

The Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok will be joining large and well-established Hmong communities in the United States. More than 186,000 Hmong men, women, and children live in the United States, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.<sup>1</sup> While Hmong live throughout the United States, the majority are clustered in communities in three states: California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

To start life over in a new and unfamiliar society is never easy. For the Hmong, there have been added challenges. In the United States, they have encountered a society that is very different, sometimes fundamentally so, from their own. Many Hmong adults have arrived with little or no formal education and with skills as farmers, soldiers, and artisans that have not proven useful in the U.S. job market. Yet, while life continues to be a struggle for many, the community as a whole has achieved remarkable economic and educational progress in the 30 years since the first arrivals. Welfare rates have dropped, employment rates have risen, and Hmong students are graduating from high school and attending college in increasing numbers. The characteristic Hmong spirit of mutual assistance is evident in the more than 100 Hmong-run community-based organizations. In other ways, too, Hmong are contributing to their communities, and to the country as a whole, as doctors, lawyers, teachers, business people, police officers, and college professors.

We can expect that the refugees from Wat Tham Krabok will face many of the resettlement challenges that previous groups encountered. Yet if past experience is a guide, we can also expect that with help from their families, friends, and service providers, the new arrivals will survive the hardships of resettlement and go on to rebuild their lives and contribute to their communities.

This profile provides information about the Hmong in general—their history, culture, language, and resettlement experiences—as well as information about the

<sup>1</sup> Includes those who report being Hmong alone and Hmong with one or more ethnic/racial designation. Hmong community leaders believe that this number is low and that the Hmong population in the United States numbers somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000.

*The community  
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has achieved  
remarkable  
progress.*

new arrivals in particular. It is intended primarily for service providers who will be assisting the refugees in their communities in the United States. But others may find it useful, too. Teachers may use it to educate students about a people whose modern history is closely intertwined with America's. Local government agencies—the courts, the police, the housing and health departments—may use it to help their staff better understand, and thus better serve, the new arrivals.

A profile by its nature oversimplifies its subject, although we have tried in this one to challenge some of the common stereotypes about the Hmong. For readers who wish to learn more about the Hmong, we provide a bibliography at the end of this profile. Ultimately, however, the best source of information about the Hmong is the Hmong themselves, and readers who find this profile interesting should consider taking the next step—getting to know those whose history and way of life are described on these pages. Readers who do will discover a people who are eager to share their stories and culture.

*The Hmong in Southeast Asia include two groups, distinguished by differences in language and custom: Hmong Der (White Hmong) and Mong Leng (Blue Hmong).*

## People

The Hmong in the United States, as well as those awaiting resettlement at Wat Tham Krabok, are members of an ethnic group from Laos, where 315,000 Hmong still reside. Several million Hmong live in southwestern China, and there are approximately 500,000 in Vietnam and 120,000 in Thailand, with pockets of Hmong communities found in Burma. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 186,000 Hmong live in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The Hmong in Southeast Asia include two groups, distinguished by differences in language and custom: *Hmong Der* (White Hmong) and *Mong Leng* (Blue Hmong). Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers are able to understand one another, for the most part, and in Laos the two groups have a long history of intermarriage and harmonious relations.

Previously, the Hmong in Laos were known as *Meo*, a term that the Hmong themselves find offensive because in the Lao language a similar-sounding word means 'cat,' and during the last 30 years, the word *Hmong* has come to be used, particularly in the United States. In China, the Hmong are still generally referred to as *Miao*.

In Laos, the Hmong, the Lu Mien, and several other highland groups are officially referred to as *Lao Soung* ('Lao of the mountain tops'), because they have traditionally lived in the higher elevations (above 3,000 feet). In contrast, the Lao—the dominant political and cultural group in Laos—live in the lowlands bordering the Mekong River and its tributaries, and are referred to as *Lao Loum* ('Lao of the lowlands'). The Lao language belongs to the Tai-Kadai language family that also includes several Thai dialects. The third major grouping in Laos is the *Lao Theung* ('Lao of the mountain slopes'), who traditionally live at lower

<sup>2</sup> See footnote on p.1.



elevations on the mountains. The Lao Theung, sometimes called *kha* by the Lao, speak Mon-Khmer languages.

In 2003, the use of the word *Hmong* as a term for both Hmong Der and Mong Leng emerged as an issue in the Hmong community in the United States. Mong Leng speakers point out that *Hmong*, spelled H-m-o-n-g, is a Hmong Der word whose Mong Leng equivalent is *Mong*, spelled M-o-n-g. The term *Hmong*, therefore, refers only to the Hmong Der and does not include the Mong Leng, whose variety of language and culture is distinct and distinguishable from that of the Hmong Der, some Mong Leng speakers argue. Alternative terms, each with its own linguistic justification, have been proposed. These include *Mong/Hmong*, *Hmong/Mong*, *Mhong*, *Mong*, and *M/hong*.

Those who support the continued use of the term *Hmong* argue that it does by convention include both groups, and they downplay the differences in custom and speech between the two. Proponents of this position believe that the use of a term such as *Mong/Hmong* would only serve to divide the community and confuse non-Hmong who are interested in learning more about the Hmong people.

In this publication, we have chosen to use the term *Hmong* when referring to both groups, because this is the term that most writers and researchers on the Hmong, and most major Hmong organizations, continue to use. Our use of the term should not be interpreted as support for a particular position in a debate that is up to the Hmong community to resolve. Service providers are advised to approach this issue with care and sensitivity.

## History

### Early History

The origins of the Hmong are obscure and the subject of speculation and debate. Hmong folktales—which describe an ancient homeland of ice and snow, darkness and light—have led some to speculate that the Hmong originated in central Siberia, although there is no independent evidence for this theory. Because the Hmong retain cultural traces of the earliest forms of Chinese social organizations, however, other specialists have considered them to be among the aboriginal inhabitants of China, where about 4 million of the world's 6 million Hmong still live today.

The earliest written accounts of the Hmong—or *Miao*, as the Hmong are called in China—are found in Chinese annals dating to the third century BCE.<sup>3</sup> These records focus on the Hmong's many uprisings against the Chinese state, which regarded the Hmong as barbarians in need of the civilizing influences of Chinese

<sup>3</sup> To avoid showing religious preference, this profile uses the neutral era designations BCE (before the common era) and CE (of the common era) in place of the Christian designations BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno domini*, 'in the year of the Lord').

*The origins of the Hmong are obscure and the subject of speculation and debate.*

culture. Between 403 and 561 CE, the Chinese record 40 Hmong uprisings against Chinese rule.

Driven off their rice fields in the fertile valleys of the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, the Hmong gradually moved to more southerly latitudes and higher altitudes. In the sixth century, with China collapsing into warring factions, Hmong leaders banded together to form a kingdom in the central Chinese provinces of Hunan, Hubei, and Henan. The kingdom flourished for several hundred years before it was destroyed by the Chinese government. The Hmong who survived the crack-down fled into the rugged mountains of Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan, where most Hmong in China still live today.

In Hmong folktales and songs, the ancient Hmong kingdom is celebrated as a golden age. Accompanying the legend is the story of a Hmong messiah who will someday lead the Hmong people to victory against their oppressors and re-establish the ancient kingdom. It is a story that has inspired Hmong insurrections throughout the centuries.

### **Under French Colonialism**

Fleeing Chinese rule, Hmong first began migrating into Southeast Asia around 1800. In Vietnam and Laos, Hmong immigrants, finding the best land at the lower levels already occupied, built small villages high in the mountains.

In the 1890s, the French, seeking a southern route into China, established control over much of Indochina. Laos offered few natural resources to exploit, and the French made little effort to develop the country. Unable to profitably exploit natural resources, the French raised revenues through taxation and forced labor.

At the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy in Indochina, the Hmong bore the brunt of the extortionate tax system. Hmong resentment led to a number of armed clashes in Laos; in Vietnam, it triggered an organized rebellion. Led by a messianic figure named Pa Chay, who, it is said, climbed trees to receive his military orders directly from Heaven, Hmong rebels fought the French with cannons carved from hollowed-out tree trunks. Dubbed by the French the *Guerre du Fou*—the Madman’s War—the rebellion lasted from 1918 to 1921 before it was quashed.

Their experience with Pa Chay prompted the French to give the Hmong a measure of autonomy and self-government. French rule also led to economic changes for the Hmong. Traditionally, the Hmong had grown small quantities of opium for medicinal purposes. Now, with French encouragement, the Hmong began to grow opium as a cash crop. Grown only at the higher altitudes, opium

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eventually became a major source of revenue for the colonial government through an opium levy for those who could not pay their tax in other forms.

Establishing a cooperative relationship with the French colonial government, the Hmong began to participate more in national life, becoming the only ethnic minority in Laos to have a leader to represent them at the provincial level.

During World War II, Hmong guerillas fought on both sides of the conflict, with some aiding the French and others working with the Japanese. It was a split that had its roots in a bitter feud between two Hmong clan leaders, Touby Lyfoung and Faydang Lobliayao. While Touby and his followers helped the French, Faydang and his followers served as guides and informers to the Japanese. "Whatever Touby and his men do, I and my men will do the opposite," Faydang is said to have vowed. Over the next several decades, the feud between these men would play itself out on the national stage, with the two clans and their followers taking opposite sides in the first and second Indochina Wars.

When Japan surrendered in 1945, the French returned to Indochina to restore their colonial rule. In Laos, they were aided in their efforts by Touby, while Faydang responded by organizing an anti-French resistance force, making contact with Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh, who were fighting the restoration of French colonial rule in Vietnam. Faydang would go on to become the highest ranking Hmong in the Lao communist government.

*Laos became a key domino in the Cold War.*

## **The Secret War**

After the defeat of the French in Indochina in 1954, the United States, fearing a communist takeover of Indochina and eventually all of noncommunist Asia, became a major player in the region. Laos, strategically situated between Western-aligned Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam and their neighbors Communist China and North Vietnam, became a key domino in the Cold War. President Eisenhower warned that "if Laos were lost, the rest of Southeast Asia would follow and the gateway to India would be opened."

In the early 1960s, the United States, barred by a Geneva agreement from committing American troops to Laos, launched what later became known as the secret war, a 10-year air and ground campaign that cost an estimated \$20 billion. Between 1968 and 1973, U.S. Air Force planes flying out of bases in Thailand dropped more than 2 million tons of explosives on communist targets in Laos, making that country one of the most heavily bombed nations in history.

The ground war in Laos was a CIA-run operation that began as a ragtag collection of a few hundred guerrillas and grew to an army of nearly 40,000. Most of the soldiers in this secret army were Hmong, who the Americans believed pos-

sessed an aptitude for warfare that the easygoing lowland Lao lacked. At first, the Hmong were used only to gather intelligence on North Vietnamese movements in Laos, but by the mid-1960s, under the leadership of Major General Vang Pao, Hmong soldiers were rescuing downed American pilots, flying combat missions, and fighting the ground war. Not all Hmong supported the American side, however: About 20% of the Hmong in Laos joined the communist side, under the leadership of Touby Lyfoung's old enemy, Faydang Lobliayao.

Why did the Hmong join the American cause? Different answers have been proposed by different writers. Anticommunism is one answer that has been offered, and a fear of what life under a North Vietnamese-dominated government would be like for the Hmong is another. Other writers claim that Hmong leaders hoped that a U.S. victory would serve to improve the status of the Hmong in Laos, perhaps even earning them a measure of self-rule.

Whatever their reasons for supporting the United States, almost all Hmong share the conviction that their involvement in the war was part of a promise made to them by the U.S. government. While there is no evidence that the promise was ever written down, almost every Hmong who fought in the war can repeat some version of it. According to a study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "[t]hough there are several versions of the 'Promise,' there can be no doubt that assurances were made to support the Hmong during the war, and to provide assistance in the event Laos was lost to the communists."

The decision to support the United States in Laos cost the Hmong dearly. An estimated 30,000 people, more than 10% of the Hmong population in Laos, were killed in the war. (Had the United States suffered an equivalent proportion of deaths, 17.5 million Americans would have died in the war.) Another 30%—about 100,000 Hmong men, women, and children—became refugees inside Laos, settling into already-existing towns or in resettlement centers.

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## **The Impact of War and Relocation**

War and relocation transformed Hmong social and cultural life. In the resettlement centers, Hmong were forced to live in small temporary huts, made from whatever material was at hand, rather than in their traditional houses carefully constructed according to principles of geomancy and with separate spaces set aside to honor a family's protective spirits. As the number of war widows with children grew, the traditional but relatively rare custom of polygamy became more widespread as a form of social support, with surviving male relatives incorporating these fatherless families into their own.

The most drastic change brought about by life in the resettlement centers was the loss of self-sufficiency. With neither enough land nor enough able-bodied men to grow their own food, the once self-sufficient Hmong became dependent on U.S. food airdrops, and a generation of Hmong children grew up without the traditional knowledge of farming.

War and relocation also had the effect of uprooting the Hmong from their isolation, bringing them into increasing contact with the Lao, as well as with other ethnic groups. Life in larger settlements brought exposure to modern technology—to guns and planes, helicopters and trucks, farming machinery and electronic equipment—and to a market economy. In *The Ravens*, his 1987 book about the secret war in Laos, Christopher Robbins describes Long Tieng, the military center for the war and with a population of 30,000, the largest Hmong settlement in the world: “Some enterprising Hmong built an ice factory, while others opened restaurants. There were photographers and Hmong dentists; Hmong became tailors, bakers, cobblers, and radio repairmen. A new cottage industry, the fabrication of brooms, blossomed in the outlying villages giving employment to over 200 Hmong families.” Another Hmong enterprise flourished after dirt roads linking three of the major centers were constructed, and Hmong converted military jeeps into taxis.

For Hmong youth, life in the resettlement centers brought new educational opportunities. In elementary schools funded by the United States Agency for International Development, Hmong children learned to read and write in Lao and French. Graduates attended a six-month teacher training program; others went on to secondary-level schools in the capital city, Vientiane. A small number managed to get scholarships to pursue higher education in France, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

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## **Under the Pathet Lao**

The war in Laos officially ended in 1973, with the formation of the coalition government between the U.S.-backed Royal Lao government (RLG) and the North Vietnam-backed Pathet Lao. Under the terms of the agreement, the Pathet Lao brought soldiers and policemen into the administrative and royal capitals of Vientiane and Luang Phrabang. In April 1975, in concert with events in Vietnam and Cambodia, the coalition government began to unravel as the Pathet Lao gained strength. After the RLG defense minister resigned and then escaped to Thailand, several RLG generals followed suit. On May 14, Vang Pao, the Hmong military leader, also fled to Thailand, after airlifting between 1,000 and 3,000 of his followers from Long Tieng to Thailand.

With their leader gone, and amidst reports of Pathet Lao reprisals against the Hmong, tens of thousands of Hmong men, women, and children began a long and dangerous trek across mountains and through jungle, working their way toward the Mekong River and eventually into makeshift refugee camps in northern Thailand. Many died along the way. Some were killed in skirmishes with Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers; others died of disease and starvation or drowned crossing the Mekong River.

A larger group of some 60,000 Hmong retreated to the Phu Bia Massif south of the Plain of Jars. From there, remnants of the CIA's secret army organized themselves into a messianic resistance movement, known as *Chao Fa*, or Lords of the Sky. Believing themselves immune to bullets, members of the movement

attacked Pathet Lao soldiers, blocked roads, and blew up bridges and food convoys. In 1978, the new Lao government, with the help of the North Vietnamese air force, finally defeated the Phu Bia-based resistance, using napalm and possibly chemical agents. Because the resistance fighters lived with their families, many civilians were also killed and injured. The defeat effectively ended the resistance, although a small number of diehard rebels continued to fight on through the 1980s and 1990s, using the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand as a sanctuary and support base.

Not all the Hmong who had sided with the United States opted to flee or fight. Many quietly returned to their villages, hoping to work out an accommodation with the new regime. An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 Hmong were sent to re-education centers—known euphemistically in Lao as *samana* ('seminar') camps—reserved for members of the old regime. In these camps, political prisoners served three- to five-year terms or longer, working hard under rugged conditions with little food and medicine. While it is not known how many people died in these camps, many did not return. A 2004 report by Grant Evans for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) notes that “to this day relatives have never been informed officially of what happened to fathers, sons, or loved ones.”

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## **Conclusion**

Media accounts of the Hmong often portray their journey to America as a sudden and dramatic crossing from traditional to modern life—with no intervening exposure to change. “The Hmong have left their remote mountain villages of northern Laos,” goes one typical newspaper story. “Like Alice falling down a rabbit hole, they have suddenly found themselves in a strange wonderland where nothing is the same. Their preliterate society has been dropped into the age of technology.”

Such stereotypes ignore the varied backgrounds and well-honed survival skills that Hmong refugees bring with them. For the Hmong, the process of change—and the challenges of adjusting to it—began long before their arrival in the United States. As noted by William Smalley, the American missionary-linguist who helped develop the most widely used of the Hmong writing systems, “Adaptation to life in America continues the process that has been going on through the lifetimes of the Hmong who are here.”

## Life in Laos

The Hmong in the United States, as well as those at Wat Tham Krabok, are originally from Laos. There, Hmong society has been shaped by life in the mountains, slash-and-burn agriculture, the practice of animism and ancestral worship, and a patriarchal family and clan system. War and dislocation, coupled with a long history of being an oppressed minority, have also altered the Hmong way of life. Yet the persistence of cultural traditions, in the face of forces to change them, is a well-observed feature of the Hmong. As William Geddes noted in his 1976 study of the Mong Leng of northern Thailand, "The preservation by the Miao (Hmong) of their ethnic identity for such a long time despite their being split into many small groups surrounded by different alien peoples and scattered over a vast geographical area is an outstanding record paralleling in some ways that of the Jews."

*Hmong society has been shaped by life in the mountains.*

## Land

Most of the Hmong in the United States come from Xieng Khouang, Houa Phan, Luang Phrabang, and Sayaboury provinces in northern Laos. Slightly larger than Utah, Laos is a land-locked nation of about 157,866 square miles in the center of the Southeast Asian peninsula, bordered by China to the north, Burma to the northwest, Thailand to the west, Vietnam to the east, and Cambodia to the south. In 2003, its population was estimated at 5.9 million.



On the western side of Laos, the Mekong River serves as the natural boundary between Laos and Thailand, with only Sayaboury and Champasak provinces situated to the west of the Mekong River. Laos is full of rugged mountains with steep terrains and narrow river valleys.

Laos has a tropical monsoon climate with a rainy season from May through October, a cool dry season from November through February, and a hot dry season in March and April. Rainfall varies regionally, with the highest amounts recorded on the Bolovens Plateau in south central Laos. Years of high precipitation can be followed by years of relatively low precipitation, causing serious declines in rice yields. Temperatures in Laos range from highs of around 100° F along the Mekong in March and April to lows of 40° F or less in the mountain areas where the Hmong live.

More than half of the Hmong in the United States come from Xieng Khouang province in north central Laos. An area of wild and rugged beauty, Xieng Khouang is a mountainous region famous for its karst limestone cliffs.

The mountains of Laos have provided the Hmong with forests full of game, land for farming, security from outsiders, and the relative freedom to run their own affairs. Yet life in the mountains has come with a price: It denies the Hmong access to many of the modern resources—educational, economic, and technological—that others in the country enjoy. The highland environment that provides the Hmong with a measure of independence can also trap them into lives of poverty and isolation.

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## **Economy**

In the mountains of Laos, the Hmong practice slash-and-burn, or shifting, agriculture, although they have many stories and songs about their past practice of rice paddy farming in lowland areas of China. Shifting cultivation is the reason for the Hmong's semi-migratory way of life. With this technique, farmers clear a piece of land, burn the vegetation, and then plant crops. After several years, they move on to a new field to allow the old fields to reforest. In most cases, they move back and forth, recycling the fields they left many years earlier, so that their environment can be kept in balance and deforestation kept to a minimum.

Not all the Hmong in Laos practice shifting cultivation. Some have also practiced lowland irrigated rice farming. In his book *Hmong at the Turning Point*, Yang Dao discusses a U.S. government-funded project in the early 1970s that resettled 1,000 Hmong families to a lowland area where they grew two crops of rice annually, raised large flocks of ducks and herds of water buffalo, and developed commercial fish ponds.

While rice is their main staple crop, the Hmong of Laos grow a great variety of other crops as well. These include corn, sweet potatoes, yams, taro, cabbage,



Chinese broccoli, parsley, tomatoes, squash, bitter-melon, radishes, cucumbers, and sugar cane.

The opium poppy is also grown as a cash crop. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French colonial government encouraged the Hmong to grow opium to pay burdensome taxes as well as to sell to the government. Since then, Hmong have grown opium for the simple reason that it is the only cash crop that they can profitably cultivate. Since the Hmong live in the highlands, far away from cities and towns, they cannot transport their produce and animals to market. In contrast, a kilogram of opium, easily carried by a person on a two-day journey to an opium trader in town, can bring enough cash to purchase a year's supply of salt, tools, and cloth.

Opium may be used by the Hmong as a medicine for the ill and a pain killer for the elderly. Without access to modern medicine, Hmong have traditionally used opium to treat diarrhea and chronic pain. It is permissible for elders who have successfully raised a family and are in their retirement years to use opium to ease their old age pains. Opium may also be used by the poor to escape lives of poverty and hopelessness. Thus, opium users in a Hmong village tend to be either the very old or the very poor.

In Laos, the Hmong raise many kinds of domestic animals, and it is common for a family to own at least one horse and a cow. Large animals are symbols of a family's wealth and power, and a well-to-do family might own many horses, cattle, and buffalo, in addition to other smaller animals, such as pigs, goats, chicken, and ducks.

The war in Laos had a profound impact on Hmong economic life, as thousands of men left their villages and families to become soldiers. Many families were split up, with husbands serving in the war zone and the rest of the family staying in the village. In other cases, wives and children accompanied their husbands and fathers to the war zone and sometimes became casualties themselves. Tens of thousands of Hmong ended up in relocation centers, where they depended on U.S. government air drops for their survival. Many teenagers, some as young as 14, were recruited to serve in the army and did not have the opportunity to enjoy a normal village life.

While war disrupted traditional life and brought great personal tragedy to families, it also brought new educational and professional opportunities. By the war's end in Laos in 1975, more than 30 Hmong students were studying overseas, with one having earned a doctorate degree, and Hmong officials were serving at high levels in the national government.

*Tens of thousands of Hmong ended up in relocation centers, where they depended on U.S. government air drops for their survival.*

## **Social Organization**

A typical Hmong village sits on the side of a mountain and consists of about 20 to 40 households. It is small enough to be in harmony with its environment, and

large enough to take care of all of its own needs and to maintain the Hmong way of life.

Before the war in the 1960s and early 1970s, most Hmong villages were poor but self-sufficient and largely self-governing. Village problems and disputes were usually settled within the village by village elders. The village chief acted as the leader and the contact person between the village and the district administrator or government representative. The council of the elders guided and assisted the village chief, acted as judge and jury, and served as the means of social control in the village.

Before the war, schooling opportunities for the Hmong were extremely limited, and in a society where literacy was rare and knowledge was transmitted orally, the elders were considered the most knowledgeable members of society. Because their life experiences and knowledge were essential to the survival of the village, the elders were the ones that everyone went to for help, counseling, and guidance in the settlement of disputes.

*Members of a clan consider each other clan brothers or clan sisters.*

## **Family and Clan**

Hmong are group oriented. Hmong society is built on thousands of years of war, resistance to oppression, and dislocation. In these circumstances, the survival of the individual depends on the survival of the group. As a result, the interests of the group come before the interests of the individual. A Hmong person belongs to a family, the family belongs to a clan, and the clan belongs to the Hmong people. Hmong often use the term *we* to refer to their family, their clan, and their identity as a people. It is very common for a Hmong person to say *peb tsev neeg* ('our family'), *peb lub xeem* ('our clan'), and *peb Hmoob* ('our Hmong people').

The family is the basic social unit in traditional Hmong society. It serves as the unit of production, consumption, socialization, social control, and mutual assistance. While a Hmong household may vary in size from a married couple to more than 20 people, a typical household consists of an extended family made up of many generations.

There are about 19 Hmong clans in Laos: Cha or Chang, Cheng, Chu, Fang, Hang, Her, Khang, Kong, Kue, Lor or Lo, Lee or Ly, Moua, Phang, Tang, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang. Within the clans, there might be several subclans, whose members can trace their ancestors to a common person or share a common tradition of ancestral worship and other ritual practices. Clan membership is obtained by birth, marriage for women, and adoption. Although a married Hmong woman continues to identify herself by her birth family's clan name, for all practical purposes she is a member of her husband's family and clan.

Members of a clan consider each other clan brothers or clan sisters. Socially and culturally, they are obligated to help each other. When two Hmong meet each other, they greet each other by saying *Koj tuaj los!* ('You come!'). When some-

one passes through a Hmong village, a villager usually greets the passerby and insists that the passerby stop by his or her home for a meal or at least a cup of water. After greeting, they exchange names, ages, clans, and generations to establish their relationship in order to properly address each other. If they belong to the same clan, they will establish the precise relationship within the clan. If not, they will establish their relationship through the marriage of their kin, beginning with their wives and aunts. They will address one another using kinship terms, such as brother, uncle, aunt, and so on. In the highlands of Laos, every Hmong is related, either through close or distant relatives.

## **Gender**

In the Hmong patriarchal system, the family is under the authority of the male head of household, who is the oldest male in the family or the oldest adult married son. When the head of the household refers to his household, he may include the nuclear family of his adult sons as well.

Because of their short life expectancy, agricultural lifestyle, and lack of access to education, the Hmong in Laos have traditionally married at a young age—16 to 20 for boys and 14 to 18 for girls. While married sons are considered part of their father's family, daughters become members of their husband's household. Because the son stays in the family and takes care of his parents in their old age, sons are usually preferred over daughters. Sons inherit the family property and heirlooms and are generally the ones to receive an education, when the opportunity exists. Because education is often not available in the village, the family can only afford to send one child away to school far away from home, and the chosen child is usually a son.

Both boys and girls learn from their parents and other adult members of the household what they need to know. A son learns from his father and uncles the skills and knowledge of rituals he needs to survive in his environment and be an effective leader. From her mother, grandmother, and aunts, a girl learns what she needs to know to be a mother, wife, and farm helper, as well as the needlework, midwifery, and music skills she is expected to master. A married woman has limited rights and voice in her parents' household, and she will have to work hard and earn her place in her husband's household. But as a mother-in-law and grandmother, she will wield a great deal of influence and authority in her family.

## **Daily Life**

A typical day for a Hmong family in Laos begins at about 4:00 in the morning or at the first crow of the family rooster. The oldest daughter and daughter-in-law are usually the first to get up. They cook breakfast, prepare foods for lunch, feed the animals, and clean the house. The husband helps his wife feed the animals and grind corn. After breakfast, the working members of the family will head to their fields, leaving the young children with the paternal grandparents.

*In the Hmong patriarchal system, the family is under the authority of the male head of household.*

Children 6 years of age or older may accompany their parents to the fields, doing what they can to help. Hmong children are expected to contribute to the welfare of the family. Children learn to baby-sit their younger siblings and help with other chores at a very early age.

After working together in the fields, the family usually returns home before sunset. On the way, they gather firewood and wild plants and herbs for dinner. At home, there are activities in the evening for everyone. Parents prepare the evening meal, attend to the animals, and make sure there are enough supplies for the next day. The paternal grandparents sit next to the fireplace with their grandchildren and tell stories. Many of these stories concern animism, animals, and the environment; others are about the past, such as when the Hmong lived in the valley of the Yellow River in China. Hmong elders also use stories to explain why things are the way they are—why, for example, the tiger has black and yellow stripes or why the bear has black hair. Outside, in the moonlight, men and teenagers observe the stars and learn to play Hmong musical instruments, while young boys practice the art of Hmong kicking.

When dinner is ready, everyone is called to the table, and it is time to share news and information. A family dinner usually includes rice, meat (boiled, fire roasted, or fried), boiled or stir-fried vegetables, Hmong vegetable soup, and sauce (chili or tomato sauce). Chicken, pork, and wild game are common meats. After dinner, young men may go to court girls in the village or in nearby Hmong settlements.

*Hmong elders use stories to explain why things are the way they are.*

## **Belief System**

A growing number of Hmong have converted to Christianity since the 1950s; by some estimates, fully one half of the Hmong in the United States are now Christians. For non-Christians, the Hmong belief system is based on animism and ancestral worship.

Animism is the belief that spirits and forces inhabit the natural universe. According to traditional belief, there are domestic, protective spirits as well as wild spirits that dwell in caves, lakes, big rocks, and other natural places. If someone offends one of the wild spirits, it can place a curse on the person, causing illness and even death. Since ordinary human beings cannot see and communicate with the spirits, it is up to the shaman, with his extraordinary powers, to intercede and to act as the ambassador from one world to the other. During his journey to the spirit world, the shaman persuades the spirits to withdraw the curse. Usually an apology is made and paper money is offered to compensate for the offense. Animism encourages the Hmong to respect animals and nature and to be in harmony with their environment. It also serves to bind the community and clan together, as members share in religious responsibilities, partake in family ritual, and help one another in the practical tasks related to ritual performances.

Ancestor worship is the belief that there is an interdependence between the deceased ancestors and their living descendants. Hmong believe that the spirits of the ancestors continue to influence the daily lives and welfare of their descendants, who in return continue to offer foods and observe the proper rituals to ensure that the ancestors are remembered and worshipped. At death their souls will be guided back to the land of the ancestors, so it is very important that the ancestors accept the deceased person's soul into the land of the ancestors. Socially, this practice keeps the Hmong family strong and family relations harmonious. The young depend on the old, and the old rely on the young. By helping people remember their ancestors and their roots, ancestor worship also serves to strengthen Hmong identity.

### **Traditional Healing Practices**

Hmong healing practices are divided into three arts: herbal medicine, spiritual healing, and acupuncture/acupressure.

When someone is ill, the family will consult with a diagnostician, who will determine the cause of the illness. If the illness is determined to have been caused by spirits, a shaman will be consulted. If the cause is food poisoning, indigestion, or energy imbalance, the family will be instructed to consult with the herbalist and/or massager/acupuncturist. Herbal medicine is also used to treat sexually transmitted diseases and broken bones.

In many cases, the treatment involves all three arts. The shaman tends to act as a spiritual healer, social worker, and psychologist. After performing his ceremony and therapy, the shaman often advises the family to consult the herbalist. The shaman deals with spirits and heals souls, while the herbalist helps to restore the patient's energy and speed the recovery process.

### **Rites of Passage**

The major events in a Hmong person's life are observed by ceremonies marking the passage from one stage of life to another.

Three days after a child is born, the family holds a soul calling and naming ceremony. The purpose of this ritual is to call the soul of the newborn to the family and to give the child a name. To call the child's soul to the family, a chicken or a pig is ritually slaughtered. The animal is then cooked and eaten by the family.

The next major event is the wedding ceremony, which is held to celebrate the union of two people and their families. It is also an event to announce to the public that the two are now husband and wife.

After a couple's first child is born, a ceremony is held to give an honorific name to the young father. The ceremony marks the young man's passage into full familial responsibility. During this event, his father-in-law will be invited to give him the honorific name. The father-in-law usually adds one name to the son-in-

*The shaman tends to act as a spiritual healer, social worker, and psychologist.*

law's original name. For example, if the young man's name is Tou and his honorific name is Nao, his new name will be Nao Tou. Occasionally, the father-in-law may decide to give the young man a completely new name. Honorific names usually have two or more syllables, in contrast to the typically one-syllable names given after birth.

A Hmong's final rite of passage is the funeral. The Hmong conduct elaborate funerals with many rituals that include the playing of reed pipe funeral music to guide the soul of the deceased back to the land of the ancestors. While beliefs about the afterlife vary, many Hmong believe that one soul of the departed will return to the land of the ancestors where it will be reborn, a second one will stay at the grave, and a third may remain in the presence of the descendants.

A Hmong funeral lasts from one to several days, depending on the age and the social and economic standing of the deceased person and his or her family. An additional factor is the travel time needed for close relatives to attend the funeral. In Laos, it may take several days to walk to the village of a deceased relative.

Hmong funeral ceremonies involve not only time but expense: In Laos, as many as 10 oxen and pigs may be slaughtered for the departed to take to the other world as company and as an asset in time of need. U.S. service providers should be sensitive to this funeral tradition, which can exceed a family's resources and run counter to local laws and customs.

*Hmong funeral ceremonies involve not only time but expense.*

## **Festivities**

The New Year celebration is the major Hmong community event of the year. Similar to the Vietnamese and Chinese New Years, it is held at the end of the 12th lunar calendar month and the beginning of the first lunar calendar month. Although Hmong New Year is unique, it shares many traditions with Chinese and Vietnamese New Year. Like the Chinese and the Vietnamese, the Hmong serve their favorite foods during the first three days of the New Year. People dress in their best clothes and refrain from speaking critically of others. They take a break from work and business, and animals also are given a respite from labor.

An aspect of the New Year celebration practiced by the Hmong in Southeast Asia is the ball-throwing game. Teenaged boys and girls line up across from one another and toss balls back forth, while singing traditional courting songs. In this way, they get to know one another, forming relationships that may eventually lead to marriage.

## **Names**

The Hmong naming system has undergone change over the past half century or so. And it continues to vary today, as well, depending on national context, fashion, and personal preference. But several patterns can be observed.

Today, a Hmong person's clan name often serves as a last name. Before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Hmong villagers in Laos rarely identified themselves by their clan name, except when specifically asked their clan membership. In the 1930s, many Hmong leaders in Laos, such as Lo Bliayao, began to identify themselves with their clan names. Starting from the 1940s, some well-known Lao Hmong also began to use their fathers' names as their last name. For example, Touby Lyfoung and his siblings used Ly Foung, their father's name, as their last name. This practice is now more common among the Hmong in Laos than it is among the Hmong in the West.

In the West, a young Hmong man today usually has two names, a first and a last name. A husband and father might have three names—his first name, his honorific name, and his clan name. A married Hmong woman from Laos or a Thai refugee camp might retain her clan name as her last name, but this practice is no longer common among Hmong Americans. It is more common for a Hmong woman in the United States to adopt her husband's clan name as her last name or to join her own clan name and her husband's clan together to form a new hyphenated last name. For example, Kazoua Kong-Thao is from the Kong clan but is married to a member of the Thao clan.

It is increasingly common for young Hmong Americans to have a first name made up of two or more words. KaYing Yang, Kazoua Kong-Thao, Maykao Y. Hang, and Yuepheng Xiong are all examples of well-known young Hmong Americans who have adopted this practice.

Many Hmong American parents have begun to give their children English first names, using the clan name or the grandfather's name as the last name. It is very common today to encounter Hmong college students named Elizabeth Lee, Amorette Paj Tshiab Yang, Michael Yang, T. Christopher Thao, and Nixon Xiong. As a result of the Hmong diaspora, there are Hmong Americans with Thai, Japanese, and French first names. For example, Kimiko Moua has a Japanese name, and Paris Vue has a French name.

Hmong parents tend to name their children according to gender and birth order. Many parents name their oldest son Toua ('the first'), their second son Lue ('the second'), and the third son Xang ('the third'). Tou ('boy' or 'Master') is a very common name for a Hmong boy, and many parents use this nickname for their sons, even though the actual name is different. May ('girl' or 'Miss') is a very common name for a Hmong girl, and many families use this nickname for their daughters.

The most common names for Hmong boys are Long, Pao, Teng, Thai, Tou, Toua, and Xang. Parents tend to name their daughters Bao or Bo, Kia, May, May la, Mee, Pa, Xi, and Yi. There are many Hmong names that can be given to both boys and girls. Some of these are Chue, Ka, Shua, Tong, and Yeng.

Upon marriage, a Hmong woman begins to identify herself with her husband and rarely uses her own name. Thus, if her husband's name is Cher Pao, she will

*In the West, a young Hmong man today usually has two names, a first and a last name.*

be known as *Niam Cher Pao* (*Nam Cher Pao* in Mong Leng), or Cher Pao's wife, and her husband will be the only person to continue to call her by her given original name. Then, after the birth of her first child, her identity will be closely linked to her child. If her child's name is Tou, for example, her husband will refer to her as *Tou Niam* (*Tou Nam* in Mong Leng), or Tou's mother. Thus, from this point on, she is either called Cher Pao's wife or Tou's mother. Her birth name will be used less and less, and by the time she becomes a grandmother, very few people will actually know her original name.

A young man, in contrast, continues to use his original name after marriage, until he is given an honorific name, usually after he becomes a father for the first time. The name of a Hmong man is very important, as his wife and children will be identified with it. Children identify themselves as "I am Tou, son of Yia Long" or "I am May, daughter of Yia Long."

## **Clothing**

Today, most Hmong in Laos, like the Hmong in the United States, wear their traditional clothes only on special occasions, such as the New Year's celebration and weddings. For everyday wear, men generally prefer to dress in Western-style clothes, while women tend to wear Lao sarong skirts and blouses.

For men, traditional Hmong clothing often consists of a pair of long black pants held at the waist by an embroidered or plain red band with a black shirt tucked in. For special occasions, men may wear a white shirt and an embroidered vest on the outside. Women's traditional clothing, which is more elaborate and varies according to the fashion trend of the time, consists of a headband of different designs, a black or multicolored shirt (some with arm bands on the sleeves), a pair of long pants, and a striped plaited skirt (for the Mong Leng) or a plain plaited white skirt (for the Hmong Der). The pants and skirts are held up by a red cloth band tied around the waist, except on special occasions, when young girls wear elaborately embroidered cloth bands decorated with silver coins. If a skirt is used, a single-apron-like square of cloth hanging down to the feet is worn on top in the front. They may be plain or decorated with embroidery, depending on the occasion.

Before 1975, when contact between the Hmong in Laos and the Hmong in other countries was rare and each subgroup wore its own traditional costumes, clothing tended to be used as markers to distinguish Hmong subgroups, such as the Striped Hmong (*Hmong Quas Npab*), whose women wear striped arm bands on their shirts, or the Mong Leng, with their fine batik plaited skirts. Today, as the result of increased contact and trade among the Hmong in China, Laos, Thailand, and the West, and the fact that it is increasingly easier to buy than to make traditional costumes, Hmong from each subgroup tend to wear the costumes from other subgroups. In this context, clothing has become more a mark of one's wealth and imagination than of group identity. As a result, the dialect spoken by a Hmong is now a surer indication of subgroup membership than is traditional clothing.

*Today, most Hmong wear their traditional clothes only on special occasions.*



## Music and Oral Literature

Music is an essential part of Hmong life. Hmong musical instruments include the jew's harp and various flute-like instruments. The most important instrument is the reed pipe or *qeej*: Where there are Hmong, there is the *qeej*. The instrument is played for entertainment, for welcoming guests, and at funeral rites. A Hmong person who wants to be a *qeej* player must be trained; it takes years of practice to memorize the flowery language of the instrument. Its music contains the entire repertoire of Hmong knowledge and wisdom.

Hmong culture is rich in oral literature. Through various forms of songs, poetry, and recitation, the Hmong pass down their stories, beliefs, history, and moral values from one generation to the next.

Many of the Hmong stories tell about an orphan who, although harassed and discriminated against by others, never gave up. He worked day and night, and through self-discipline and perseverance, he eventually became a man and a king. The orphan in the story can stand as a symbol for the Hmong people themselves—orphans without their own country who survive wherever they go.

## The Refugee Experience in Thailand

During the two decades after the communist takeover in Laos in 1975, several hundred thousand Hmong took the dangerous journey on foot through the Laotian countryside and across the Thai border, formed much of the way by the Mekong River. The fortunate who survived the trip ended up in one or more first-asylum refugee camps: Ban Vinai, Nong Khai, Ban Nam Yao, and Chiang Kham.

### Three Waves

The early Hmong refugee movements have been divided into three waves. First-wave refugee groups are typically made up of those who have the most to lose by the change in governments, and the Hmong were no exception to this pattern. Lasting from 1975 to 1977, the first wave of Hmong refugees mostly included soldiers from the secret army and their families.

A second wave of Hmong arrived between 1978 and 1982, a period when both lowland and highland Laotians fled drought and crop failure, compulsory farm collectivization enforced by the Lao communist government, and attacks on the resistance movement. These were also the years of the largest exodus of Indochinese refugees, a period when 21 first-asylum, processing, and transit camps were set up in Thailand, in addition to some encampments for Khmer refugees on the Thai–Cambodian border that were not designated as camps. The numbers of Hmong refugees increased as a third wave (1982 to 1986) brought additional asylum seekers. By 1987, about 75,000 Laotian refugees were known to be in Thailand. Of these, the majority—about 54,000—were hill-tribe people, mostly Hmong in Ban Vinai and Chiang Kham camps.

*Many of the Hmong stories tell about an orphan who, although harassed and discriminated against by others, never gave up.*

Neither Western governments nor their Indochinese counterparts were willing or able to reach a political solution to the refugee situation. Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia remained relatively closed, and development assistance from the West was minimal. Repression of the Hmong in Laos, declining economic conditions in that country, and the availability of food and medical attention in the camps contributed to the steady flow of Hmong refugees into Thailand.

## **Camp Conditions**

Conditions in the camps varied from barely tolerable to awful. In a book about the Hmong in America, Vu Pao Tcha, a Hmong in Fresno, California, described conditions in Ban Nam Yao in northeastern Thailand: "The conditions in Camp Ban Nam Yao. . . were terrible, especially when it first opened. There were no toilets. People had no water to wash themselves. There was no clinic for the sick. There were no jobs, no land to grow food, and virtually no way of getting money to buy food."

Conditions in Ban Vinai were better, though hardly idyllic. In the early years, the Hmong themselves determined housing patterns in Ban Vinai, and observers often compared the camp to an overgrown Hmong village in northern Thailand. But by the mid-1980s, the camp had grown beyond its capacity to comfortably accommodate its many thousands of residents.

In 1986, Lynellyn Long, a refugee-worker-turned-researcher, returned to Ban Vinai for a visit after an absence of several years. "The camp is more settled, dirtier, and more crowded than I remember," she wrote in *Ban Vinai: The Refugee Camp*. "With 43,000 to 45,000 people living on approximately 400 acres (slightly less than one square mile), it is one of the most densely populated places in the world.... The camp buildings built to be temporary are showing signs of age and falling into disrepair. The few open spaces in the camp, the small streams and gullies, have become open sewers. Everywhere the thick red-dish dust blankets the land." Without land to cultivate crops, the economic foundation of traditional Hmong life gave way to a dependence on camp rations from the UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations.

In these conditions, refugees nevertheless managed to create a culturally familiar way of life. Residents visited the shaman when ill and conducted funerals and celebrated New Year in the traditional Hmong manner. For the enterprising and resourceful, life in Ban Vinai was not without opportunities. Adults could attend English and vocational-training classes, and children could attend a Thai elementary school. Markets sold everything from fresh fish and fruit to cosmetics and herbal medicines. The camp included blacksmiths, silversmiths, a barber, several small restaurants, and a photographer who took pictures of his subjects against a backdrop of the Swiss Alps. Small family vegetable gardens dotted the grounds.

By 1986, life at Ban Vinai had taken on a semi-permanent quality, with the average length of stay in the camp approaching seven years. The situation was not

*Conditions in the camps varied from barely tolerable to awful.*

the result of a U.S. unwillingness to resettle the Hmong, however; because of their role in the war in Laos, more than 90% of Hmong refugees in Thailand had been accepted for resettlement to the United States. Rather, the large number of long stayers in Ban Vinai was largely the consequence of a Hmong reluctance to leave Thailand. Many hoped to stay in Thailand until they were certain that they could return to Laos without suffering reprisals, or until relatives in Laos could join them to resettle together in a third country. Other Hmong were active in the resistance movement in Laos, and were using Thailand as a base, with support from conservative Thai and American factions. Still others hoped to remain permanently in Thailand. Stories from relatives and friends about the difficulties of life in the United States also contributed to the decision to stay put.

## **Thai Concerns**

To the Thai government, the Hmong reluctance to leave Thailand was of great concern. While over the years Thailand had allowed temporary asylum for up to 200,000 Hmong, it had always made clear that local resettlement in Thailand was not an option for the Hmong.

Not only was the Hmong population in the camps in Thailand not decreasing, it was growing, despite a gradual drop in refugee arrivals. The reason for this growth was the Hmong birth rate in the camps, one of the highest in the world and roughly three times the Thai rate. Worried about the growing Hmong population, the Thai government put into place a policy of “humane deterrence” designed to deter asylum seekers and to encourage those already in Thailand to resettle to the West or to return to Laos.

As part of this new policy, the Thai government instituted stricter border screenings, using U.S. resettlement criteria to determine who would be allowed into Thailand. Interviewing refugees for resettlement in the West was periodically halted as a way to send the message to others to not come to Thailand. Then, with no warning, interviews would recommence in order to reduce the size of the camp population.

Life for Hmong refugees in Thailand became more difficult as the government consolidated camps and tightened control over camp life. Authorities reduced food rations to the minimum and limited opportunities for work and education. Assistance to the camps from Western governments declined. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and deteriorating living conditions, the prevailing mood among the refugees was one of anxiety alternating with boredom.

In 1992, as pressures mounted to find options for the Hmong who remained in the camps, the Thai government made the decision to close Ban Vinai. Those not resettled in a third country would be sent to a transit camp pending repatriation to Laos. As the closure date drew near, several thousand Hmong fled into the hills of the northern Thai countryside. Others journeyed south to Tham Krabok Monastery, known in Thai as *Wat Tham Krabok*.

*Life for Hmong refugees in Thailand became more difficult as the government consolidated camps and tightened control over camp life.*

## **Wat Tham Krabok**

A Buddhist temple complex about 80 miles north of Bangkok, Wat Tham Krabok was headed by a charismatic abbot, Phra Chamroon Parnchand. Before becoming a Buddhist monk, the abbot had served as a policeman in northeastern Thailand, where he had fought a communist insurgency and become acquainted with the Thai Hmong. At his temple complex, the abbot began a drug rehabilitation program that received worldwide renown. Making use of herbs, the program was open to everyone, including foreigners, and among those the program helped were many Thai Hmong. For his work, the abbot received the Magsaysay Award in 1975, the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize.

The abbot was sympathetic to the plight of Hmong refugees in Thailand, and word quickly traveled to the Hmong in Ban Vinai and elsewhere that Wat Tham Krabok afforded protection and offered an alternative to repatriation to Laos and resettlement in the West. Although most of the monastery's early residents were from Ban Vinai, residents from other camps also made their way to the monastery. Later, a repatriation program that sent Hmong to Nap Pho Camp in northeastern Thailand from other refugee centers, in preparation for their eventual return to Laos, triggered another exodus to the monastery. Even a few Hmong on administrative hold who had been studying in a three-month English and Cultural Orientation program in the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Center in preparation for resettlement in the United States managed to make their way to the monastery.

The early 1990s were years of relative freedom for the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok. In fact, the refugees proved useful in what had become a booming Thai economy. The abbot found jobs for the Hmong in construction work on a new road nearby, and others took jobs in neighboring towns and in quarries in the area, to which they commuted daily. In what became a bustling community, shops were opened and Hmong handicrafts sold to tourists and to Hmong in the United States. Hmong silversmiths and blacksmiths produced and sold their wares. Others sewed *paaj ntaub* (pronounced *pan dau* in English) the traditional embroidered story cloth, much of which went abroad for sale. Some residents received money from their resettled relatives. By the early 1990s, the Hmong population at Wat Tham Krabok was estimated at 30,000.

While the atmosphere in the monastery was welcoming, services were minimal. Hmong cleared land for their homes and built their own houses using whatever materials were at hand. Unlike in the first-asylum camps, Wat Tham Krabok offered no free medical or social services, and Hmong residents continued their traditional healing practices. In November 2003, a Hmong-run school began teaching Hmong and Thai literacy to residents.

## **The Temple and the Thai Government**

Although for years the Thai government tolerated the situation at Wat Tham Krabok, not all Thai officials were comfortable with the Hmong presence at the

*Wat Tham Krabok afforded protection and offered an alternative to repatriation to Laos and resettlement in the West.*

monastery. Rumors that Hmong residents were involved in resistance efforts in Laos created tensions between Thailand and Laos at a time when the Thai government had wanted to improve relations with its neighbor. In addition, reports of drug trafficking on the part of some Thai Hmong prompted concern in Thailand that the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok could become involved in the drug trade.

When the abbot died in 1999, the Hmong lost an important benefactor, and the Thai government decided to change the situation at Wat Tham Krabok. In 2003, after registering the monastery's Hmong residents, the Thai government officially closed Wat Tham Krabok to any additional Hmong. Access to work outside the monastery was greatly restricted.

Word began to circulate of Thai intentions to send all Hmong at the monastery to a camp in the northeast for eventual repatriation to Laos. Thai efforts to repatriate the Hmong came to naught when Laos refused to accept the Hmong because of their past involvement in resistance activities. News that the United States was considering a resettlement program for the Hmong eventually appeared in the Thai media and in December 2003, the United States announced its intentions to consider for resettlement the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok.

When this publication went to press, the U.S. resettlement program was restricted to those Hmong at the monastery who had been registered by the Thai government in September 2003.<sup>4</sup> Lao Hmong refugees who had been living in Thai Hmong settlements outside of the monastery were not eligible for resettlement. These included a group who had left the monastery during the registration, apparently fearing that the registration was the first step in a process to repatriate the Hmong back to Laos. The status of these Hmong remains unclear at this time.

## **Generational Responses to Camp Life**

The Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok have lived at the monastery and at other camps in Thailand for many years; indeed some of the younger Hmong have known no other way of life. What impact has this experience had on the Hmong? After all these years of refugee camp life, how do the Hmong view resettlement in the United States? What skills and strength will they bring with them?

As Lynellyn Long noted in her Ban Viani study, in prolonged camp situations different generations develop marked differences in the way they pattern their daily lives and envision life beyond the camp. In the refugee camps in Thailand and at the monastery, Hmong elders typically focused on doing things in a tra-

<sup>4</sup> Aware that some Hmong at the monastery may not want to resettle, U.S. authorities are allowing anyone over the age of 18 who wishes to resettle, but whose parents do not, to apply separately, with the permission of a parent or a responsible adult relative. In such situations, younger siblings can also apply if the older brother or sister is at least 21 years old.

*Different generations develop marked differences in the way they pattern their daily lives and envision life beyond the camp.*

ditional way, including carrying out traditional rituals and, for some, using traditional medicines such as opium and herbal remedies. The “middle” or “war generation”—that is, those who fought in the war in Laos—generally grappled with their immediate situation, seeking ways to supplement their family’s meager ration; they have gathered food and charcoal outside the camp or earned day wages by harvesting crops for nearby villagers or, at Wat Tham Krabok, working on construction jobs. The young “camp generation” showed the most interest in studying; some seemed willing to take up whatever course was offered. In Ban Vinai, where dozens of international agencies provided social services, it was not unusual to encounter young Hmong who had managed to pick up several of the many languages that were taught and spoken in the camp.

These different generational responses to camp life sometimes caused tensions when decisions about the future needed to be made. Many elders wanted to stay put until they could return to Laos. Stories circulated about elders sabotaging a family’s chances for a resettlement offer by smoking opium, thereby making it impossible to pass the required drug screening. Children, in contrast, were often keen to start new lives in the West. The war-generation adults were caught in between, wanting their children to have a future but not willing to leave aging parents behind. This also is the generation that has been most active in resistance activities.

### **New Roles and Opportunities**

Life in the camps and at the monastery has also had an impact on traditional family roles. Women, who can make money through sewing handicrafts and clothing, have often had more success at earning wages than men. Young people have learned English (and Thai) faster than adults—skills that have sometimes helped them find coveted jobs with camp service providers. Because of their proficiency in language, younger Hmong have often been the ones to translate documents or interpret for the family with camp authorities, service providers, or resettlement interviewers from embassies. This has given younger people an influence in the family that can upset the traditional family dynamics.

All Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok, whatever their age and generation, have been exposed to modern urban life during their long sojourn in Thailand. Through work, recreation, and television, most have been exposed to the latest technology, modern modes of transportation, and even world politics. This makes them different from the first groups of Hmong refugees who were resettled in the United States.

While camp life has been filled with challenges and pressures, many Hmong have been able not only to survive, but also to begin the process of rebuilding their lives. At Wat Tham Krabok, as in the refugee camps, the Hmong have proven to be industrious and resourceful, taking advantage of whatever opportunities for work and education have existed.

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Since the United States announced its resettlement program for the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok, English language classes there have been in great demand. A Hmong-run English language school with Hmong teachers, primarily young men who learned English in other refugee camps, is filled to capacity (with more than 1,800 learners of all ages as of March 2004). The school uses curricula and materials from English language programs in the Ban Vinai and Phanat Nikhom camps. In addition, Hmong teach classes in their homes, which are also very popular. This keen interest in learning English is a positive sign and bodes well for the resettlement of the Hmong in the United States.

### **Growing Up in Refugee Camps**

Wat Tham Krabok residents Kao Lee, 33, and her husband, Meng Chang, 38, have lived most of their lives in refugee camps, reporter Todd Nelson writes in a March 7, 2004, article about the couple for *The Twin Cities Pioneer Press*.

Meng Chang and Kao Lee were children when they arrived with their parents at Ban Vinai Camp in 1975 and 1979, respectively. They met and were married at Ban Vinai and had the first three of their children there. They left for Wat Tham Krabok in 1992 and have remained there to this day. The last three of their six children were born at the temple.

Until he broke his collarbone in a motorcycle accident, Meng Chang worked outside the camp as a day laborer. Kao Lee sews traditional Hmong clothing, which she sells locally and in the United States. They expect to resettle in Minnesota, where Meng Chang has a brother. "Before, even though the life is like this for a long time, we thought maybe we would die in the camp," Meng Chang told *The Pioneer Press*. "Now life is different. Now we have hope."

*To think of the Hmong as a preliterate people oversimplifies the past and ignores the present.*

### **Literacy and Education**

The popular notion of the Hmong is that they are an oral or "preliterate" people, lacking an alphabet and knowledge of basic literacy processes. In this account, most Hmong people did not read and write as late as the 1950s, and many had never seen books or even held pencils. Such characterizations are not altogether inaccurate. The Hmong scholar Yang Dao has reported that in some provinces of Laos in the 1970s, the rate of Hmong who did not read or write was as high as 99%, while a 1986 study by Karen Green and Steven Reder of 20 Hmong refugee families in the United States indicated that 80% of those surveyed could not read or write Lao, and 70% could not read Hmong.

Yet to think of the Hmong as a preliterate people oversimplifies the past and ignores the present. Far from being a people unfamiliar with writing, the Hmong have long been aware of the powers and potentials of written language. Moreover, they have experienced diverse forms of literacy in multiple languages

over the last century. In recent years, Hmong men and women in the United States have developed new literacy skills in English and Hmong, while thousands of young Hmong have graduated from secondary schools and colleges. Many have earned graduate degrees.

## **The Power of Literacy**

Hmong stories reveal a preoccupation with the power of written language. According to Hmong legends, the Hmong once ruled a kingdom in China where they possessed their own lands, their own armies, and their own indigenous Hmong alphabet. In the continuous warfare against the expansionist Chinese, however, the Hmong king was killed, his family butchered, and great numbers of Hmong people driven south. In the course of their escape, the Hmong “book”—the symbol for their Hmong alphabet and knowledge of writing—fell into the waters of the Yellow River and was lost. In another version of this story, it was eaten by horses as the Hmong slept, exhausted from their flight. In a third version, it was eaten by the Hmong themselves, who were starving.

*The vast majority of people in Laos received little or no education.*

## **Literacy and Education in Laos**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of Hmong refugees from China had settled in northern Vietnam and Laos, where they lived in remote mountainous regions. Public schooling was largely unavailable in these areas. In fact, schooling throughout Laos was extremely limited. The educational policy of the French colonial government, Yang Dao has written, was to create an aristocracy of peoples, with a highly trained elite at the top and the minority ethnic peoples such as the Hmong kept in a condition of “intellectual inferiority” at the bottom. In six decades of French rule, not a single high school was constructed in Laos, and by 1940, only 7,000 Laotian students were attending primary schools in a colony of approximately 1 million people. Very few of these students were Hmong.

Nor did the situation change significantly after Laos achieved independence, when ethnic minorities were still more likely to be denied schooling than to receive it. In the educational system sponsored by the Royal Lao Government, students from the wealthiest classes were favored over students from low-income sectors of Laotian society. This meant that the vast majority of people in Laos received little or no education. A 1973 study of the Laotian educational system showed that while students from the wealthiest classes constituted less than 1% of the total Lao population in 1968–1969, they totaled 24% of the enrollment in Lao schools, while the poorest classes, which accounted for 98% of the total population, made up only .4% of school attendance. By the early 1960s, a two-tier educational system was firmly in place. While the children of the wealthy, urbanized, French-educated Lao elite had access to schooling, the vast majority of children in Laos received limited or no schooling at all.

The situation was even worse for the Hmong, the overwhelming majority of whom had no access to public schools. For example, while the ethnic Lao



accounted for roughly half the population of Laos in the 1950s, they made up 88% of the enrollment in secular schools. The Hmong, in contrast, accounted for less than 4% of the school population, even though they constituted about 8% of the total population of Laos. The late 1960s saw an effort to provide more educational opportunities for non-French-speaking children with the introduction of the Lao-medium *FaNgum* middle and secondary schools. Because these schools were located in lowland urban areas, however, few Hmong students attended.

## **New Opportunities**

The prospects for Hmong literacy development began to change in the 1950s and 1960s, however, with the ascendancy in Laos of two very different powers with very different reasons for seeking out the Hmong: the United States CIA and Christian missionaries.

### **Literacy and the CIA**

As the Hmong army became central to the CIA's secret war in Laos, Hmong leadership found they had greater leverage to make certain demands upon the Royal Lao Government and its patron, the United States. One of the demands was for greater access to education. In response, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) financed an intensive school construction program for Hmong students in the context of a nation-building effort designed to support U.S. goals in Laos. Under the direction of Edgar "Pop" Buell, a retired Indiana farmer who had come to Laos with the International Voluntary Services, USAID built hundreds of schoolhouses in remote Hmong villages. According to Don Schanche, a reporter for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the U.S. school-building program built almost 300 elementary schools, 9 junior high schools, 2 senior high schools, and a teacher training school. A study of Hmong schooling rates in Laos during this period reported that Hmong enrollment in the village schools rose from 1,500 students in 20 schools in 1960, to 10,000 students by 1969. Students in these schools learned to read and write in Lao, studying a curriculum of Lao history, government, and ethics. Those who remained in school beyond a few years were introduced to French language and literacy.<sup>5</sup>

### **Missionary Literacy**

The second major force stimulating Hmong literacy development in Laos was the creation in the 1950s of the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), a writing system designed by Western missionary-linguists for the Hmong language. The RPA was used to translate bibles, prayer books, hymnals and other religious materials into written Hmong and thus facilitate the spread of Christianity. Both

<sup>5</sup> In regions not controlled by the Royal Lao Government, the communist Pathet Lao were also providing literacy training. In 1964, the Pathet Lao reported 36,200 children enrolled in "liberated" elementary schools, with another 250 students in secondary schools, according to Joel Halpern and Peter Kunstadter. The Pathet Lao also claimed to have opened four teacher training schools and two adult education schools and to have published 380,000 textbooks. The Pathet Lao also developed and promoted its own writing system for the Hmong language.

*The prospects for Hmong literacy development began to change in the 1950s and 1960s.*

Catholic and Protestant missions taught the RPA in bible classes, and some Hmong learned to read and write their native language in such settings. By 1959, for example, small groups of Hmong were studying the system in the area around Sam Neua. Although the Hmong had some access to Lao language literacy in the village schools, the RPA was unique in that it offered Hmong people a chance to become literate in their own language—a compelling prospect for some Hmong. As one man recalled to researcher John Duffy,

*I saw an alphabet book, a Hmong alphabet teaching book, that was created...by the fathers from the church....Yes, and we went to church, and they read it, and they had those books. And I saw that those books were interesting, and I thought, you know, oh, this will be helpful. This is my language. This is my alphabet. I should know this. I should learn.*

While the RPA was known to some in Laos, the alphabet achieved a far more prominent role when it caught on among Hmong refugees in Thailand. As the Hmong were resettled in Western nations across the world, family members, friends, and other loved ones who had been separated needed a way to communicate across distances. Many Hmong turned to the RPA, which was in the Hmong language, was easy to learn and was taught informally in one-to-one settings. In *The Mother of Writing*, the missionary-linguist William Smalley and two Hmong colleagues estimate that thousands of Hmong learned the RPA this way, and the writing system continues to be used by Hmong in the United States, in China, and elsewhere.

*The RPA offered Hmong people a chance to become literate in their own language.*

## **Other Literacies**

While the RPA is the most widely used of the Hmong writing systems, it is only one of many that have been developed. In their book, Smalley and his Hmong colleagues document at least 14 attempts to create a writing system for the Hmong language over the last 100 years, and at least six of these are still in use. These systems have been created by Western missionaries, who used literacy as a tool for spreading Christian doctrine; by governments in China and Southeast Asia, who viewed literacy as a means for promoting national identity and diminishing ethnicity; and by Hmong people themselves, who in the last 40 years have produced at least seven independent writing systems for their language, most of which have been linked to complex political and cosmological visions.

## **Literacy and Education in Thailand**

Hmong continued to acquire literacy skills in first-asylum refugee camps in Thailand, where children attended Thai and Hmong schools, where adults obtained English and vocational training, where missionary work using the RPA continued, and where many Hmong received training for the clerical and administrative work necessary to maintain the large and functioning bureaucracy that managed the Ban Vinai refugee camp, home to most Hmong refugees. As part of their preparation for life in the United States, Hmong refugees who had been accepted for resettlement received several months of

training in English at the U.S. Department of State-funded Overseas Refugee Training Program at the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Processing Center. It is estimated that more than 20,000 Hmong refugees also studied Hmong literacy at the processing center's Native Language Literacy program.

## **Literacy and Education in the United States**

Since the Hmong began arriving in the United States in the 1970s, thousands have attended U.S. schools, earning high school diplomas, master's degrees, and doctorates. In addition, many Hmong men and women have acquired English literacy in adult ESL classes and Hmong literacy in community-based language programs.

One measure of the growing importance of literacy for the Hmong is the increasingly active role Hmong are taking in the civic life of their communities, using literacy as a means to engage in questions of race, citizenship, and the place of newcomers in American cities. A recent study by John Duffy of Hmong literacy development in a Midwestern U.S. city examined how Hmong residents used their English language literacy skills for writing letters, editorials, press releases, and other texts to advance increasingly differentiated political and cultural agendas.

Thus, the recent history of the Hmong undermines the conventional notion of the Hmong as preliterate people. While it is true that many Hmong people in Laos did not learn to read and write until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many other Hmong in the same period were exposed to literacy in several languages and in different writing systems. In this sense, the literacy experiences of the Hmong are far richer and more complex than commonly acknowledged.

## **Resettlement in the United States**

The Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok will be joining well-established Hmong communities in the United States. The first groups of Hmong refugees began arriving in the United States in 1975, shortly after the communist takeover in Laos. In 1979, the U.S. resettlement of Hmong refugees increased significantly, and by the mid-1990s more than 100,000 Hmong had been admitted to the United States. Today, the 2000 Census reports that there are more than 186,000 Hmong Americans in the United States.<sup>6</sup> While Hmong live throughout the country, the largest populations are clustered in five states: California (71,741), Minnesota (45,443), Wisconsin (36,809), North Carolina (7,982), and Michigan (5,998).

Because the great majority of the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok will be joining relatives in the United States, we can expect most new arrivals to resettle in the five states with the greatest concentrations of Hmong. Additionally, a small number will go to Arkansas, Colorado, and other states with smaller Hmong populations.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote on p.1.

*We can expect most new arrivals to resettle in the five states with the greatest concentrations of Hmong.*

While the refugees will be resettled by experienced resettlement agencies, most will also have family co-sponsors, who will need information about their roles and responsibilities and the ways to help their refugee relatives gain access to resources and services.

The refugees will be joining Hmong communities in the United States that have achieved remarkable educational and professional successes over the past two decades, even as individual Hmong continue to struggle to adjust to a way of life that is very different from what they had previously experienced. In this section, we consider the resettlement prospects of the new arrivals in light of their background experiences and the experiences of previous groups of Hmong refugees resettled in the United States.

## **Employment**

### **In Thailand**

Past groups of Hmong refugees have arrived in the United States from refugee camps where opportunities for work were limited and where families depended on international humanitarian agencies for their basic survival. In contrast, at Wat Tham Krabok, international assistance was not available until recently, and many of the Hmong there have worked inside and outside the temple complex to support themselves and their families.

Hmong residents of the temple have worked in a variety of Thai industries and in several positions within those industries. Many Hmong men and women have worked on nearby Thai farms, tilling, picking, and packaging. Others have worked for construction contractors and a local rock quarry. Some small, Hmong-run businesses—knife making, musical instrument making, sewing, and silversmithing—have operated in the temple complex. All of these working Hmong possess transferable skills and interests that should be recognized and built upon as much as possible in the United States.

Because the Hmong were unable to obtain legal status in Thailand, however, they were treated as essentially undocumented workers and were frequently subject to exploitation and abuse by their employers in terms of pay, hours, and working conditions. They are likely to arrive with little understanding of the U.S. workplace or such concepts as job benefits, skills upgrading opportunities, and employee rights. In particular, they may be unaware of the time mandates that U.S. employers must follow. They also may not grasp the importance of obtaining a legal job in the United States as all their work to date in Thailand has been under the table.

### **In the United States**

The new arrivals will be joining communities that have made significant economic progress over the past two decades, at the same time that many Hmong individuals remain on the economic margins. According to the 2000 Census,

*Hmong residents of the temple have worked in a variety of Thai industries.*

10% of Hmong aged 16 years and older were not in the labor force, compared with 6% for the general population. While this rate is high, it is a marked improvement from the 1990 rate of 18%. The highest reported Hmong unemployment rates were found in Washington (22%), Alaska (16%), and California (14%). The lowest Hmong unemployment rates were observed in North Carolina (7%), Colorado (6%), Kansas (6%), Massachusetts (6%), Michigan (6%), Oregon (4%), South Carolina (3%), and Oklahoma (0%). In Minnesota and Wisconsin, which are home to nearly half of the Hmong in America, 9% of the Hmong were unemployed, which is significantly higher than the 3% exhibited by the overall population in those states.

What kinds of jobs do Hmong hold? The 2000 Census shows that of the Hmong who are employed, 43% were clustered in manufacturing jobs, compared with 15% for the national population, followed by sales and office (21%) and services (16%). It should be noted that only a small percentage of U.S. Hmong are in farming, fishing, and forestry jobs—traditional areas of work for the Hmong.

One sign of progress for the Hmong community is the growing number of men and women working in the better paying and socially more prestigious job sectors, such as medicine, science, teaching, engineering, law, management, and politics. The 2000 Census puts 7% of working Hmong men and 5% of Hmong women in these jobs, compared with 10% for men and 9% for women as a whole in the United States. This is a dramatic change. Only two decades ago, the Hmong had one of the lowest rates of literacy and formal education among refugee groups in the United States, and very few men, and almost no women, held professional jobs. Today, Hmong men and women are doctors, lawyers, engineers, business owners, and university professors. More than 100 community-based organizations staffed by Hmong professionals provide essential services to Hmong communities throughout the United States. Recently two Hmong Americans were elected to the Minnesota state legislature.

While these gains are impressive, the resettlement history of past groups of Hmong speaks to the need for thorough, comprehensive job readiness training and world-of-work orientation. Arriving Hmong will need to learn the requirements and rights of the U.S. workplace, to understand the benefits of legal and early employment and to fully explore career options that build on skills and interest.

Just as the Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok bring a work history far different from past groups of Hmong refugees, so is America a vastly different place from what it was a generation ago. When the first Hmong arrived in the mid-1970s, they were allowed 36 months of financial support under a federal government program called Refugee Cash Assistance (RCA). Today, they are expected to be working by the end of eight months. In the 1970s, services were usually sequential; job placement activities generally began only after a long first phase of English language training (ELT) followed by a vocational training phase. Today, refugee services are provided concurrently and swiftly; employable adults are

*Today, Hmong men and women are doctors, lawyers, engineers, business owners, and university professors.*

expected to attend English language classes while in an active job search with an employment counselor.

Finally, in most states the welfare system is far more restrictive, with far more stringent work requirements, than it was when the first Hmong arrived. Even older Hmong are not exempted from employment the way they were 25 years ago. And an arriving 55-year-old Hmong will not be entitled to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) at 65 years of age unless he or she becomes a citizen or works 40 quarters.

Moreover, the new arrivals will be joining a host community that may not be aware of these changes in service mandates, welfare laws, and employment expectations. Well-meaning families, recalling their own resettlement experiences, may encourage their relatives to slow down, not rush into job placement, and extend English language training for as long as possible. With this family pressure, the newly arrived Hmong may feel deeply conflicted about pursuing a job and accepting early employment. Service providers will need to work closely with the host communities to prepare and educate them about the new realities of the resettlement system.

With every immigrant and refugee population in the United States, cross-cultural issues invariably surface in the workplace. As with other groups, Hmong have their own set of norms in terms of employment that counselors will need to learn and respect. For example, the American tendency to encourage competition and reward individual success may run counter to the Hmong value of harmonious group relations, as the following case study illustrates.

### **Case Study: Employment**

**A group of Hmong women worked on an assembly line in a Wisconsin food plant for several years. Impressed by their loyalty, skills, work ethic, and attitude, the head of the company offered to train the women for machinist positions that would pay four times their current salary. Seven women completed the rigorous 10-week training and five passed the test. But when the first machinist position became available, none of the five applied. They stated that it was not proper for them to be superior to the others, to be in a position more elevated and powerful than those on the assembly line.**

**Possible questions for discussion:**

- *What, if anything, could the employer have done to prevent this outcome?*
- *What strategies can now be used to remedy the situation?*
- *How will you counsel your client about job upgrades?*

## *Case Study: Employment*

## Housing

From their years of living in Thailand, the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok will be much better prepared for modern-day housing than previous groups of Hmong refugees were. Those who could afford it have built wood-frame houses with concrete floors, and with support from their relatives in the United States, many families have purchased and installed ovens, stoves, rice cookers, and other modern conveniences. Outside the temple, residents have had easy access to the Internet through cyber cafes.

It is likely that many of the newly arrived Hmong will live temporarily with relatives before moving into their own rental units. Once they are ready to move into their apartments and houses, finding adequate, affordable housing for large multigenerational families is expected to be the same challenge for the new arrivals as it was for previous groups of refugees. Renting an apartment or house, and all that that entails—signing a lease, paying rent on time, understanding tenant rights and responsibilities—will be an unfamiliar experience for most new arrivals.

It can be expected that owning a house will be a priority for the new arrivals, as it has been for past groups of Hmong refugees. While the process of purchasing a house will be an unfamiliar one—in the mountains of Laos, Hmong simply built their own homes, with no need for credit or collateral—the desire for ownership should be keen, judging from the experience of Hmong in the United States. In just three decades, the rate of Hmong American home ownership is comparable to that of other immigrant groups. In Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, 50% of the Hmong own their own homes. In California, however, the rate of ownership remains a relatively low 16%.

## Education

### In Thailand

It is expected that most Hmong adults at Wat Tham Krabok, like previous Hmong refugees, will arrive in the United States with little formal education. Many adults will not be literate in any language. It is not known how many have learned the RPA, the most common of the various Hmong writing systems. An estimated 50% of Hmong adults in the United States are able to use this writing system to some extent.

Since the announcement of the U.S. resettlement program, English classes, taught by Hmong volunteers, have become increasingly popular at Wat Tham Krabok. Hmong Mutual Assistance Associations (MAAs), local resettlement offices, and other organizations serving refugees should expect the new arrivals to show a keen interest in English language classes. As we have learned from past efforts to teach English to the Hmong, adult ESL classes are more successful when they focus on the practical English that people need during their first months in the United States. For nonliterate Hmong, successful approaches use a lot of visuals and take advantage of learners' memorization skills. (In cultures

*English classes, taught by Hmong volunteers, have become increasingly popular at Wat Tham Krabok.*

that do not depend upon print to pass down knowledge and communicate information, the ability to remember large amounts of material appears better developed than it is in print-based cultures.)

Initial registration of the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok indicates that more than half of the refugees are under the age of 18. Of these, it is likely that many have had some schooling in Thai-medium elementary schools (and therefore speak Thai). However, because the Thai government did not allow Hmong children over the age of 12 to attend Thai school, it is expected that few Hmong children will have finished high school. Older teenagers arriving in the United States with just a few years of education will be in need of special services and support.

It should be noted that while most children at Wat Tham Krabok have obtained some schooling, many have not because their parents needed them to work to help support the family or to take care of younger siblings while the adults in the family worked. Some children have earned money collecting metal to sell to blacksmiths; older children have sewn and worked as farm laborers.

### **In the United States**

The new arrivals will be joining Hmong communities in the United States that have made tremendous educational strides over the past two decades yet still lag behind other groups in educational attainment. Academic achievement is the highest it has ever been in the history of the Hmong, with a growing number of Hmong youth entering institutions of higher education. However, only 3% of Hmong youth graduate from college, compared with 18% for Americans overall, and the high school dropout rate among Hmong youth remains disproportionately high.

In a 2003 report prepared for Congress, entitled *Southeast Asian Americans and Higher Education*, the Southeast Asian Resource Center (SEARAC) examined the underlying causes of academic underachievement among Laotian (including Hmong), Vietnamese, and Cambodian students. Among the major obstacles it found were the following:

- **Limited proficiency in English.** Limited proficiency in English seriously hampers the academic achievement of many Southeast Asian students. In one survey, only about 30% to 35% of Southeast Asian students considered themselves able to speak English “well or very well.”
- **Poor communication between students, parents, and teachers.** As the result of language and cultural differences, communication between students and school personnel is often poor. With little or no formal education, parents are often unable to participate in their children’s education and provide their children with educational guidance. And with little English, parents are unable to communicate their concerns to teachers. In this situation, students often rely on guidance from friends who may share the same challenges and may not be in a position to provide needed support and responsible direction.

*With little English, parents are unable to communicate their concerns to teachers.*



- **Discrimination.** The SEARAC report notes that in a 1995 study of Southeast Asian students in Southern California and Southern Florida by Reuben Rumbaut, 70% of the student respondents reported discrimination. This discrimination can take the form of racial and ethnic slurs on the part of other students or lower academic expectations on the part of teachers.

- **Alienation from schools.** Many Southeast Asian students feel that they do not belong in the school. This is partly because schools do not pay enough attention to Southeast Asian cultures in the curriculum and partly because there are not enough Southeast Asian teachers and staff in the schools. The report notes that in 1997 California had only 28 certified bilingual Hmong teachers for more than 31,000 Hmong students. This situation has improved since then, yet the ratio of Hmong staff to Hmong students remains poor and a source of academic underachievement.

## Case Study: Education

### Case Study: Education

A newly arrived Hmong refugee family with two school-aged children receives a letter from the daughter's teacher that asks the parents to attend a parent-teacher conference the following week. The letter, which is in Hmong, requests the parents' attendance and either a verbal or a written response to confirm attendance. The father calls his cousin, who has lived in the United States for many years and speaks fluent English, and asks him to attend the meeting on his behalf. He considers the matter settled, and does not reply to the teacher.

- *Why doesn't the father communicate with his daughter's school directly?*
- *How is the teacher likely to react when she does not receive a response from a family?*
- *Can you suggest ways of addressing issues raised in this case study?*

### Health and Well-Being

For years, the Hmong population at Wat Tham Krabok has survived on its own without the support of international assistance. Residents have relied on the small income they have been able to earn outside of the temple and on aid from their Hmong American relatives. For those who have not been able to work and do not have relatives in the United States, life has been very difficult indeed. For some, malnutrition has been an issue. While health problems commonly seen in acute refugee crises, such as measles, malaria, severe malnutrition, and acute war injuries, are not a major concern at Wat Tham Krabok, there appears to be a high incidence of acute respiratory illness and skin diseases.

Until recently, medical care at the temple was minimal. One clinic, visited by a Thai doctor and nurse once a week, provided health care that was free for those without income, although patients reported being pressured to pay for medications and services. The clinic had no laboratory facilities and no advanced medical equipment. There were no ambulance or emergency services available.

While in the past medical authorities have conducted mass immunizations for adults and children, local experts feel immunizations are incomplete for those over the age of 2.

Since the beginning of the U.S. resettlement program, medical care—and access to it—has improved considerably. A public health physician, hired by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and a contingent of Thai public health nurses, provided by the Thai government, provide care throughout the temple. Daily clinic visits have risen from about 30 per day to more than 100. Residents are no longer pressured to pay for medicines, and ambulance service is now available. According to the U.S. State Department, age-appropriate immunizations will be administered to refugees before they depart.

Visitors to Wat Tham Krabok have noted that unlike previous groups of Hmong refugees, the residents at Wat Tham Krabok appear well aware of the benefits of Western medicine and look forward to having access to medical care in the United States.

Mental health among the residents at Wat Tham Krabok is an issue of considerable concern. In early 2004, a medical delegation from St. Paul, Minnesota, visited the temple and found evidence of major depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly in older women. The extent of these disorders is unclear.

### **Traditional Health Practices**

Despite the daily presence of stress in their lives, by all accounts the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok appear to have survived the challenges of life there with characteristic resilience. They have also depended on support from traditional healers. Though they have lived at the temple for the last decade, most of the residents are not Buddhists but animists, who believe that the natural universe is inhabited by powerful spiritual beings and forces. Most believe that people have multiple souls and that illness occurs when a person loses a soul. When this happens, the sick person often seeks a *txiv neeb*, or shaman, to perform healing ceremonies to call the soul back into the body.

It should be expected that many refugees, upon arriving in the United States, will want to perform these soul-calling ceremonies in order to call their souls to America. This ritual should be supported as part of the healing process that will enable refugees to move on with their lives in America.

In addition to relying on shamans, the Hmong in Wat Tham Krabok, as well as in the United States, use herbal medicine to treat ailments. Today, many Hmong in the United States use Western medicine in conjunction with herbal medicine and shamans, a practice we can expect to see among the new arrivals from Wat Tham Krabok.

*The residents at Wat Tham Krabok appear well aware of the benefits of Western medicine and look forward to having access to medical care in the United States.*

## What U.S. Health Professionals Can Do

U.S. service providers and health professionals need to understand the differences between traditional Hmong health care and Western medicine, since these differences can lead to cross-cultural conflict and even tragedy, as poignantly illustrated in Anne Fadiman's book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. For example, many Hmong believe that people have a finite amount of blood and frequent samples taken by health professional will drain a person of it all. Unlike Western physicians, shamans generally do not ask patients to disrobe or to talk about their personal lives, and they will often spend hours with an ill patient. As much as possible, health professionals in the United States should work with patients to understand their feelings about the cause of their conditions, ask if they are seeking other forms of treatment, and try to accommodate their beliefs.

To address the mental health care needs of the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok, the Refugee Mental Health Program at the Center for Mental Health Services in Rockville, Maryland, recommends a culturally sensitive, patient-based approach to health care. While focusing on mental health care, the approach is equally relevant to physical health care. Among the recommendations to Western health professionals are the following:

- When assessing a client, take into consideration the family and clan structure: What is the patient's clan? Who are the recognized clan leaders? Who is the identified family head? Who are the important people in the patient's life and how might these people relate to his or her complaints and presenting symptoms?
- Incorporate into assessment and treatment plans ideas and suggestions from family members and other people who are important to the patient.
- With the help of a culture broker, provide education on Western notions of disease and distress and relate these to traditional notions.
- Be prepared to use a Hmong leader or someone else the patient trusts and respects to help bridge the gap between Western and traditional approaches to health and well-being.

## Case Study: Health

After experiencing a stomachache for several days, Mr. Pa Teng Xiong, a middle-aged Hmong man, asks his wife whether they have any herbal remedy in the house to help settle his stomach. His wife calls her parents and a few relatives, one of whom gives her some herbs to boil. In spite of the herbal drink, the stomachache persists, and Mr. Xiong mentions it to his caseworker, who suggests a visit to a doctor's office. Mr. Xiong declines to visit the doctor and calls his *txiv neeb* (shaman) instead, asking him to come to the house and perform rituals to see whether there are any evil spirits in the house, in Mr. Xiong,

## Case Study: Health

or in any of his relatives. The shaman suggests that Mr. Xiong slaughter an animal to appease the ancestors and to bring good health back to his household.

- *What possible challenges could this scenario present for the service provider?*
- *How should the caseworker deal with Mr. Xiong's reluctance to seek advice from a Western medical professional?*

## **Special Group Issues**

As Hmong create new lives for themselves in the United States, they will face complex issues rooted in cross-cultural differences. The traditional values and attitudes that underlie Hmong behavior are often different from and at odds with those of many Americans. Perhaps the single biggest difference is that while Americans stress the importance of individual freedom, Hmong generally place the interests of the group—whether it is the family, the clan, or the community—before the interests of the individual. A second critical difference is that Hmong traditionally view social roles, in terms of family, age, and gender, as fixed; in America, these roles are constantly being negotiated and challenged.

The following discusses a few of the key issues that women, men, youth, and the elderly can be expected to face as they grapple with changing roles and new identities.

### **Women**

Hmong women and girls at Wat Tham Krabok will encounter many changes in the United States, as they face a future that is dramatically different from the one their mothers were prepared for while growing up in the mountains of Laos. There, marriage marked the greatest change in the life of a woman, as she left her birth family to enter her husband's home. As a wife and daughter-in-law, she obeyed the wishes of her husband and his family. In the United States, Hmong women and girls will have unprecedented opportunities to seek education and work in a profession outside the home. To succeed at home, at work, and at school will require a new and complex set of skills and the ability to balance old and new roles.

### **Men**

Hmong men also face a new and very different future. In Laos, men were the sole and undisputed leaders in their families. Life in the refugee camp may have already begun to erode traditional leadership roles, and in America men will face further challenges to their authority in a society that believes in an equal voice for women and greater freedom of choice for children. This change will be a matter of considerable concern to Hmong men. Men, like women, will need to find a balance between new and traditional roles.

*Hmong traditionally view social roles, in terms of family, age, and gender, as fixed.*

## **Youth**

Like other refugee and immigrant youth, Hmong children often feel caught between two opposing worlds—that of the traditional culture and that of America. Just as parents expect their children to be “more Hmong,” Hmong children often expect their parents to be more “American,” which means, among other things, to endorse their children’s individuality and give them greater freedom of choice.

How a young Hmong resolves the conflict between two contradictory sets of expectations is often the central issue in his or her life. It determines, for example, whether a bright young Hmong woman decides to get married at 17, as is often expected by her community, or goes to college, as expected by the society at large.

Those who arrive in the United States as teenagers can face special challenges. Dubbed *generation 1.5*, they are part of neither the first generation of their parents nor the second generation of children born in the United States. More so than their parents or younger siblings, they live in two worlds, with two sets of languages, rules, and customs. And they are required to negotiate these two worlds at the same time that they are making the difficult transition from adolescence to adulthood.

For those who are educationally behind when they arrive in the United States, the situation is further complicated by the lack of appropriate school programs for them. As a result, many withdraw from what seems to them the impossible task of simultaneously learning high school material while learning English. Aware that students need more than just a few hours of ESL a day if they are to enter the academic mainstream, some schools have designed entire curricula around the special needs of these students. These programs indicate that when teaching and materials have been adapted to the students’ levels of language and background knowledge, they, too, can experience academic success.

### **Hmong Women's Circle Program**

**Hmong Women's Circle (HWC) is a program of Hmong National Development that was founded in 1999 by Kashia Moua, a Hmong woman. Today, HWC continues to be shaped by Hmong women and girls as it meets the needs and celebrates the identities of Hmong girls in 30 middle and secondary schools in California, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. Coordinated by Hmong American women, HWC programs help Hmong teenaged girls appreciate, understand, and accept who they are, and then works to build leadership skills and promote health and education. The program has helped increase participants' self-esteem and confidence, as well as improve grades and decrease the number of incidents of discipline in schools.**

*Hmong children often feel caught between two opposing worlds—that of the traditional culture and that of America.*

## **Elders**

Older Hmong refugees at Wat Tham Krabok represent a small but very vulnerable population. They have long suffered the rigors of involuntary displacement, and the move to America may prove most difficult of all. Given the hardships older refugees in the United States face, it is not surprising that many report psychosomatic illnesses, such as headaches and stomach pains.

Traditionally regarded as the source of wisdom in the Hmong community, many elders experience a dramatic loss of status and self-esteem in America, where social position depends on education, professional achievement, and financial success. Their knowledge of the traditional culture, while publicly praised by the community, is often seen as irrelevant in the new setting.

Further, they do not learn English at the same rate as their children and grandchildren do, and this only serves to exacerbate feelings of isolation and worthlessness. No research suggests that older adults cannot succeed in learning another language. Attitude, not age, is the most decisive factor in language learning. Physical ailments, depression, and stress interfere significantly with concentration and the commitment to learn English.

For refugees who arrive after the age of 45, workforce entry rates are considerably lower than they are for those of younger refugees. Moreover, service providers may screen them out of job placement efforts, focusing instead on the family's primary wage earner. Yet older Hmong arrivals from Wat Tham Krabok will encounter pressures to work that previous groups of older Hmong did not face. Under rules recently revised by the U.S. Department of State, older refugees are considered employable until the age of 65 years. This means that, unlike the Hmong who arrived a generation ago, a newly arrived refugee in his or her 50s is expected to go to work. And, as noted in the section on employment, they will need to work 40 quarters to become eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) at age 65, unless they become naturalized citizens in the intervening years.

The great majority of older Hmong live with their families. In the United States, many devote their time to the upbringing of their grandchildren, which can compensate for the isolation felt in other realms of their lives. In addition, support groups for older refugees have proven very successful in preventing illness, providing practical information, and easing isolation. It is expected that many elderly refugees will spend hours talking on the phone with friends who have been placed at other resettlement site; this will offer them a vital link to the past as well as a way to cope with the present and future.

*No research suggests that older adults cannot succeed in learning another language.*

## Language

The Hmong in Laos, Thailand, and the United States speak *Hmong Der* (White Hmong) and *Mong Leng* (Blue Mong).<sup>7</sup> *Mong Leng* is also frequently written as *Hmong Leng*, spelled with an initial *H*, but some Mong Leng speakers prefer the term without the initial *H*, and we follow that preference in this profile.

Hmong Der and Mong Leng are dialects in the Hmong branch of the Hmong-Mien family, spoken in Southeast Asia and southern China. The Chinese designation for Hmong-Mien is *Miao-Yao*, but because that designation is not based on language exclusively, most linguists outside of China prefer the term *Hmong-Mien*. Anthropologists, who are interested in things other than language, continue to use the term *Miao-Yao*.

More than half of the words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng are Chinese in origin, and there are similarities in grammatical structure between Hmong Der/Mong Leng and Chinese, as well. For these reasons, scholars in the past classified Hmong-Mien as members of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Today, however, most linguists outside of China believe that the similarities between Hmong Der/Mong Leng and Chinese are the result of centuries of contact between the two rather than a common inheritance, and few scholars outside of China classify Hmong as a Sino-Tibetan language.

## Mutual Intelligibility

For the most part, Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers seem able to understand one another without much difficulty. There are numerous and systematic differences between the two, however, and some Hmong claim to have difficulty understanding speakers of the other dialect. Most of these differences lie in pronunciation, though words and even syntax sometimes differ also. One difference in pronunciation, for example, explains the difference in spelling between the words *Hmong* and *Mong*. Mong Leng speakers do not have the Hmong Der sound that is represented as *hm* in the Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), the most common alphabet used to write the two dialects. (This sound, called a *voiceless nasal* does not exist in English; to produce it, close your lips as if to make the sound [m], but breathe out hard through your nose instead.) When Mong Leng speakers pronounce the word, the consonant is similar to the English sound [m].

Before the war in Laos, Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers typically lived in separate villages, and speakers had more difficulty understanding one another than they do today, war and relocation having brought the two groups and their language varieties into close contact and familiarity with one another.

<sup>7</sup> Another term for *Mong Leng* is *Mong Njua*, which means 'Blue/Green Mong.' We do not use that term here because some Mong Leng speakers consider the word *njua* derogatory. Although *Mong Leng* is commonly rendered in English as 'Blue Hmong,' the word *leng* does not mean blue. Thomas A. Lyman's 1976 *Dictionary of Mong Njua, a Miao (Meo) Language of Southeast Asia* translates *leng* as 'tendon, artery; cord; seam.' The meaning of *leng* in the context of *Mong Leng* is unclear, however.

*Before the war in Laos, Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers typically lived in separate villages, and speakers had more difficulty understanding one another than they do today.*

In the West, Hmong Der is the dialect that is most commonly used in public documents (e.g., Hmong community newsletters and translated U.S. government documents), educational materials (such as dictionaries and primers), and in Hmong language courses being taught at the secondary school level. While some Mong Leng seem to have accepted this situation as simply the way things are, others have protested what they consider discriminatory and unequal treatment. When providing the Hmong with written materials, service providers should be mindful of Mong Leng sentiments and consider translating the materials into both dialects.

## The General Structure of Words

Words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng are generally of one syllable, though words with two or more syllables do exist. A typical word is made up of a consonant—or a blend of consonants—and a vowel or a diphthong (a combination of vowel sounds). Every syllable has a tone, signified in the RPA by a consonant at the end of the word.

## Sounds: Consonants, Vowels, and Tones

### Consonants

A distinctive feature of Hmong Der and Mong Leng is the number of consonant sounds. Hmong Der has 36, and Mong Leng has 34. However, native speakers feel that what we call consonant clusters are actually single consonants, bringing the total number of consonants up to 58 in Hmong Der and 60 in Mong Leng. English, in contrast, has only 24. (Keep in mind that we are talking about sounds, not letters.)

Some of the consonant sounds in Hmong Der and Mong Leng are very similar to those found in English. For example, the consonants [f], [h], [l], and [y] in Hmong Der and Mong Leng sound very much like their English equivalents. Other sounds are somewhat different. For example, both Hmong Der and Mong Leng have a [t] that to an English speaker sounds sometimes like a [t] and sometimes like a [d]. The term in linguistics for this sound is a *nonaspirated* [t]—that is, a [t] without an accompanying puff of air. English has this kind of a [t] in words like *still*, but not at the beginning of words, as in Hmong Der and Mong Leng.

Other consonants in Hmong Der and Mong Leng have no equivalent in English. An example is [hn] as in *hnab* ('bag'). To make this sound, raise your tongue to the roof of your mouth to make the sound [n], leave it there, and breathe out through your nose. Another consonant that does not appear in English is the sound written in RPA as *r*, which is quite unlike the English [r]; it is what linguists call a *retroflex* [t], and is made with the tongue curled back. A third Hmong Der/Mong Leng consonant exists in English but is not common. Written in RPA as a *q*, it is actually closer to an English [k], but made further back in the mouth.

*A distinctive feature of Hmong Der and Mong Leng is the number of consonant sounds.*



The technical term for this sound is *uvular*. While this sound is not common in English, it does occur in the speech of some native English speakers as a variant of [k] in words like *caulk*.

Of particular difficulty to the English speaker are consonant clusters that occur at the beginning of words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng. An example of this is the sound that is written in RPA as *nplh* and occurs in the word *nplhaib* ('finger ring'). If you are able to put together the three sounds of [m], [p], and [l] into a single sound, you will approximate the pronunciation of that consonant cluster.

### **Vowels**

In Hmong Der and Mong Leng, there are altogether six simple vowels, five diphthongs, and two or three nasal vowels (two in *Hmong Der* and three in Mong Leng). Most of the vowels in Hmong Der and Mong Leng also exist in English. One that does not is the vowel sound at the end of *Hmong Der*. There is no final [r] in Hmong; in the English spelling *Hmong Der*, it is a stand-in for a vowel that English does not have. To try to pronounce this vowel, make a [u] sound as in *moon*, and then, keeping everything inside your mouth the same, slowly un-round your lips.

### **Tones**

Every word in Hmong Der and Mong Leng has one of seven tones,<sup>8</sup> differing from one another mostly in pitch. For an English speaker, tones constitute the single most difficult aspect of Hmong Der and Mong Leng. In tone languages, the rise and fall of the voice—the pitch—is as much a part of a word as consonants and vowels are. In English, pitch is not irrelevant to meaning. When English speakers say *Oh?* with a rising pitch, they mean one thing; when they say *Oh!* with a falling pitch, they mean something else. But the word is essentially unchanged. In Hmong Der and Mong Leng, by contrast, each word has a tone attached to it that sets it apart from every other word. As Bruce Bliatout, Bruce Downing, and Judy Lewis explain in *Handbook for Teaching Hmong-Speaking Students*, "Just as *map* and *mat* and *mad* in English are different because the final consonants differ, so in Hmong *ma* with a high tone or mid tone or low tone is considered three different syllables with three different meanings."

In other tone languages written in the Roman alphabet, tones are sometimes indicated with marks above the letters. This is the case with Vietnamese, for example. In the RPA, however, tones are indicated by consonants placed at the end of words. This system works because in Hmong Der and Mong Leng there are no consonants at the end of words, except an occasional *-ng*, which is indicated by a doubling of the vowel.

Thus, the word *tib* ('to pile up') is not pronounced with a final [-b] sound. Instead, the final consonant indicates that the syllable should be pronounced

<sup>8</sup> There is an eighth minor tone, which is a variant of one of the other seven.

*In tone languages, the rise and fall of the voice—the pitch—is as much a part of a word as consonants and vowels are.*

with a particular tone—in this case, a high level tone. The same syllable pronounced with a mid-level tone means ‘near, close to.’

The following table lists and describes the seven tones as they appear in seven words. To an English speaker, the words sound virtually the same, but to a Hmong Der or Mong Leng speaker, these are seven distinctive sounds and seven different words.

**Table. Hmong Der and Mong Leng Tones**

RPA	Tone Description	Example	English
-b	high level	<i>taub</i>	pumpkin, squash
-j	high falling	<i>tauj</i>	a type of tall grass, similar to elephant grass
-v	mid rising	<i>tauv</i>	to dam, hold back (water)
-	mid level	<i>tau</i>	get; got (used to indicate past action)
-s	mid low	<i>taus</i>	ax
-g	mid low breathy	<i>taug</i>	loose; follow-up
-m	low glottalized	<i>taum</i>	bean

Note. The word list in this table was compiled for this profile by Peter Yang, Director of the Wausau Area Hmong Mutual Assistance Association, Wausau, Wisconsin.

### Grammatical Structure

While English speakers who study Hmong Der and Mong Leng find the sound system difficult, they generally find the grammar relatively easy. This is because, in contrast to English, words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng do not change form. There are no suffixes, like English *-s* plurals or *-ed* past tenses or *-ing* participles. There are no noun declensions, as there are in French and Spanish. Nor is there grammatical gender; that is, there are no masculine or feminine nouns, although there are of course ways to indicate gender. And the form of a word does not change depending on its use in a sentence. An English speaker says, *I love you* and *You love me*: *I* changes to *me* when it comes after the verb. In Hmong Der and Mong Leng, however, the word for *I* (*kuv* in RPA) remains the same in both positions:

<i>Kuv</i>	<i>hluv</i>	<i>koj</i>
'I	love	'you'
<i>Koj</i>	<i>hluv</i>	<i>kuv</i>
'You	love	'me'

An interesting grammatical feature of Hmong Der and Mong Leng (as well as Chinese and many other Asian languages) is their use of *classifiers*. These are words that go between numerals and nouns. English has something similar with words like *bar* and *piece* in *one bar of soap* and *a piece of cake*, but the use of such

*In contrast to English, words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng do not change form.*

words in English is optional, and their purpose is limited: They provide more precise information about the amount of the thing that is being discussed (for example, *I don't want a piece of chocolate; I want a bar of chocolate*). In Hmong Der and Mong Leng, in contrast, classifiers routinely appear before any noun that is preceded by a numeral. Whereas an English speaker says *one house*, a Hmong Der or Mong Leng speaker must place a classifier between *one* and *house*. Different classes of nouns take different classifiers. For *tsev* ('house'), the classifier is *lub*:

<i>ib</i>	<i>lub</i>	<i>tsev</i>
'one	(classifier)	house'

An area of similarity between English and Hmong Der and Mong Leng is sentence structure. Like English, Hmong Der and Mong Leng sentence structure follows the basic SVO pattern—that is, subject-verb-object:

<i>Kuv</i>	<i>pom</i>	<i>nws</i> (Hmong Der)
<i>Kuv</i>	<i>pum</i>	<i>nwg</i> (Mong Leng)
'I	saw	him/her'

The structure of words within sentences, however, does not always follow the English pattern. Whereas in English adjectives precede the noun (*big house*), in Hmong Der and Mong Leng the adjective usually follows the noun, as it does in French and Spanish.

## Learning English

By looking at the differences between English and Hmong Der and Mong Leng, we can predict some of the areas of challenge that Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers might encounter when they first begin to study English.

Although English has a few vowel sounds that do not exist in Hmong—for example, the short [ɪ] sound in the word *bit*—this area of difference does not seem to cause a great deal of difficulty. Consonants, on the other hand, generally do prove troublesome. Even though Hmong Der and Mong Leng have more consonants than English does, English has some sounds that can be difficult for Hmong learners. Two examples are the initial consonant sounds found in the words *this* and *thistle*. The [ʃ] sound in the middle of the word *suggest* is another sound that may be difficult. For many Hmong learners, consonants at the end of words such as *married*, *warmth*, and *bulb* are especially difficult, since Hmong Der and Mong Leng words rarely end in consonants. Because words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng are generally of one syllable, polysyllabic English words also can prove troublesome.

The basic subject-verb-object sentence pattern of English should not present problems to Hmong Der and Mong Leng speakers, since this is the pattern that prevails in their languages. Hmong learners, however, generally do encounter

*Hmong learners generally encounter difficulty with the inflectional system of English.*

difficulty with the inflectional system of English—the various grammatical forms used to indicate (among other things) plural (*girls, children*), possessive (*boy's*), pronoun cases (*she, her, hers*), and verb tenses (*take, took, taken*), none of which exists in Hmong Der and Mong Leng. For Hmong learners, the difficulty is compounded because inflectional changes in English often involve adding one or more consonants to the end of a word, and as we noted earlier, words in Hmong Der and Mong Leng almost always end in a vowel. Thus, a Hmong learner encounters difficulty with the word *showed*, not only because of the grammatical change from *show* to *showed* but also because of the consonant at the end of the word.

## Common Words, Phrases, and Sayings

Hmong Der	Mong Leng	English
<b>Numbers</b>		
Ib	Ib	One
Ob	Ob	Two
Peb	Peb	Three
Plaub	Plaub	Four
Tsib	Tsib	Five
Rau	Rau	Six
Xya	Xyaa	Seven
Yim	Yim	Eight
Cuaj	Cuaj	Nine
Kaum	Kaum	Ten
Nees nkaum	Neeg nkaum	Twenty
Peb caug	Peb caug	Thirty
Plaub caug	Plaub caug	Forty
Tsib caug	Tsib caug	Fifty
Rau caum	Rau caum	Sixty
Xya caum	Xyaa caum	Seventy
Yim caum	Yim caum	Eighty
Cuaj caum	Cuaj caum	Ninety
Ibpuas	Ibpuas	One hundred
<b>Time Expressions</b>		
Hnub no	Nub nua	Today
Tas kig	Pis kig	Tomorrow
Nag hmo	Naag ho	Yesterday
Lub lim piam	Lub lim tam	Next week
Thaum tag kig sawv ntxov	Thaum Taag kig sawv ntxov	In the morning
Thaum yav tav su dua	Thaum yaav taav su dlua	In the afternoon
Thaum yav tsaus ntuj	Thaum yaav tsaus ntuj	In the evening
<b>Polite Expressions</b>		
Ua tsaug	Ua tsaug	Thank you
Thov	Thov	Please

### Common Greetings

Koj puas nyob zoo? Kuv nyob zoo	Koj puas nyob zoo? Kuv nyob zoo	How are you? I am doing fine.
Koj puas nyob zoo, tus phooj ywg?	Koj puas nyob zoo, tug phooj ywg?	How are you, friend? (Greeting for a man)
Koj puas nyob zoo, tus muam?	Koj puas nyob zoo, tug muam?	How are you, Sister? (Greeting for an unmarried woman)
Koj puas nyob zoo, niam tij/niam ntxawm?	Koj puas nyob zoo, nam tij/nam ntxawm?	How are you, Sister-in-law/ Auntie? (Greeting for a married woman)
Koj puas nyob zoo, txiv? niam txiv ntxawm yawg pog	Koj puas nyob zoo, txiv? nam txiv ntxawm yawm puj	How are you, Father? Mother Uncle Grandfather Grandmother

### Common Sayings

**Hmong Der:** Pos kaus ntse tsi yuav hliav; txiv neej yawg 35 xyoo tsi yuav piav.

**Mong Leng:** Xuav paug kaug ntse tsi yuav hlav; txiv neej yawg 35 xyoo tsi yuav pav.

**English:** No need to make a thorn sharper; no need to explain further to a 35-year-old man.

**Hmong Der:** Pojniam ua qaib qua; txivneej sawv sib tua.

**Mong Leng:** Quaspuj ua qab qua; txivneeg sawv sis tua.

**English:** Woman need only to make the rooster crow, and men will get up to fight each other. (In other words: Women have only to gossip or tell stories, and husbands will start fighting each other without checking out the facts first.)

**Hmong Der:** Luag tsaj tsi nrog luag tsaj; luag tsaj tau ces mam li ua dev nuam yaj

**Mong Leng:** Luag tsaaj tsi nrug luag tsaaj, luag tsaaj tau ces maam le ua dlev nuam yaaj

**English:** When they work you do not work like them; when they get results, you act like a dog looking on—with envy.

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## Web Sites

The following Web sites are sources of information on the Hmong:

- Gary Yia Lee Web site: <http://www.truenorth.net.au/userdir/yeulee/>  
Information on Hmong people, history, culture, and resettlement experiences by a leading scholar on the Hmong.
- Lao Family Community of Minnesota, <http://www.laofamily.org/>  
Information about the Hmong in Minnesota along with historical and cultural data about the Hmong people.
- Hmong National Development, Inc.: <http://www.hndlink.org>  
A source of information on Hmong community activities throughout the United States; also includes information on Hmong culture and history.
- Hmong Studies Internet Resource Center: <http://www.hmongstudies.org/>  
A source of information about studies of Hmong history, culture, and adaptation in Hmong communities around the world.
- Hmong Studies Journal: <http://members.aol.com/hmongstudies/hsj.html>  
Electronic publication devoted to the scholarly discussion of the Hmong people, history, culture, and other facets of the Hmong experience in the United States, Asia, and around the world.
- WWW Hmong Homepage: <http://www.hmongnet.org/>  
A collection of resources relating to Hmong history, culture, language, and current events.

