LOPER-NOWAK, ASHLEY N. Ph.D. From the Secret War to Southern Soil: The Hmong Journey of Resettlement and Integration in North Carolina, 1970-2020. (2024)
Directed by Dr. Thomas Jackson. 166 pp.

This dissertation examined the multifaceted journey of the Hmong people, from their involvement in the Secret War in Laos to their resettlement and integration into American society, with a specific focus on North Carolina. Through oral histories, personal testimonies, and archival research, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Hmong experience in North Carolina, shedding light on broader themes of migration, integration, and cultural preservation. The narrative encompassed the Hmong's experiences of displacement, struggles with integration, and efforts to preserve their cultural heritage across generations. Due to their role in the Secret War and alliance with the United States, the Hmong were forced to flee Laos for fear of persecution. Many Hmong refugees eventually resettled to the U.S., but experienced significant challenges in finding employment and adapting to a new culture. Nearly a third of all Southeast Asia refugees entered the U.S. through California, but many migrated and permanently resettled in North Carolina, making it the state with the fourth largest Hmong population. Over next few decades, Hmong refugees utilized cultural practices to maintain their identity while navigating the complexities of integration. Despite facing trauma and displacement, they strive to preserve their traditions, passing them down through generations. Second-generation Hmong Americans, also struggled with their identity, language barriers, and intergenerational trauma. Despite these challenges, they remained proud of their cultural heritage and sought to uphold it in the face of adversity. The Hmong in North Carolina continue to support and empower Hmong Americans, reflecting a broader commitment to refugee resettlement and community support.

FROM THE SECRET WAR TO SOUTHERN SOIL: THE HMONG JOURNEY OF RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION IN NORTH CAROLINA, 1970-2020

by

Ashley N. Loper-Nowak

A Dissertation
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro

2024

Approved by

Dr. Thomas Jackson
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the Hmong who were forced to flee their homes, leaving behind their familiar and embarking on a journey filled with uncertainty. Your stories of hope, determination, and unwavering spirit inspire us all. May this dissertation serve as a testament to your indomitable human spirit, and may shed light on the challenges your face and the triumphs you achieve along the way. Your journey is not unnoticed, and your struggles are not forgotten. In dedication to refugees worldwide, may we continue to stand in solidarity, extend compassion, and work towards a world where every individual can find safety, dignity, and a place to call home.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation written by Ashley N. Loper-Nowak has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair	Dr. Thomas Jackson
Committee Members	Dr. Mark Elliott
	Dr. Jill Bender
	Dr. Lisa Levenstein

April 15, 2024
Date of Acceptance by Committee

April 29, 2024
Date of Final Oral Examination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Thomas Jackson, for the unwavering guidance, invaluable insights, and endless encouragement throughout the entirety of this program. His expertise, patience, and commitment have been instrumental in shaping this dissertation and me as a scholar. I am profoundly thankful to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Mark Elliott and Dr. Jill Bender, for their valuable feedback, support, and constructive criticism which has greatly enriched this work. I am also greatly appreciative of Dr. Lisa Levenstein, the fourth member of my committee, for giving me the bravery to see this project to the end. I would also like to extend a special thank you to the archivists, librarians, and the individuals I interviewed whose support and participation made this project possible. I extend my heartfelt appreciation to other faculty members in the department, including Dr. Richard Barton and Dr. David Wight, who were always willing to giving a listening ear and additional support and resources throughout this process. I am also greatly indebted to the staff of the department, Laurie O’Neill, Dawn Avolio, and Kristina Wright, who provided undue support and guidance. I would have been lost without you all.

Special thanks are due to my friends and colleagues for their camaraderie, stimulating discussions, and moral support throughout this process. Thank you to Ashley Low, Azariah Journey, Emma Waldie, Naglaa Rashwan, Gabrielle Girard, Alexander Grindstaff, Krista Clark, and Amanda Weller, who provided continued words of encouragement throughout this process. I would also like to thank Emilee Robbins, Jewel Parker, Rob Skelton, and Abigail Shimer who read versions of chapters and provided wonderful feedback. Finally, a very special thank you to Kaitlyn Anderson, the other member of my cohort, who read versions of this dissertation,

countless seminar papers, and proposals over the years. I am truly grateful this journey brought us together.

To my friends and colleagues at Every Campus A Refugee and Guilford College, Dr. Diya Abdo, Dr. Christian Mathies, Dr. Sonalini Sapra, Dr. Cathryn Bennett, Noor Ghazi, Walid Mosarsaa, Kathleen Herbst, and Rhiannon Kelly, who gave me additional support and mentorship. I am eternally grateful. Special thanks are due to my dearest friends Dr. Paige Figanbaum and Tay Sandberg who provided me with daily laughs, writing sessions, and love. I truly do not know what I would do without your friendship. I would also like to thank Dr. Leisl Carr Childers and Dr. Michael Childres who gave me the encouragement to pursue a PhD program. I thought of your advice almost daily.

To my mother, Angela, and sisters, Courtney and Lindsey, who provided immeasurable love, support, and understanding during the ups and downs of this dissertation process. You are my inspirations. To my in-laws, Pete, Therese, Jon, Sara, and Sam Nowak, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude for their encouragement. And to my pets, Chandler, Sarge, and Pimento. Chandler, my sweet cat, who moved across the country and has been with me through it all, has provided soothing purrs and cuddles during late night writing sessions. To my whippet, Pimento, who reminded me to take a break and get outside every day. And to my senior greyhound, Sarge, who reminded me to enjoy the simplicity of life and that sometimes the only thing that truly does matter is peanut butter.

Finally, my largest debt of gratitude belongs to my dear husband, Ben Nowak, who picked up his life while we were still dating to move from Iowa to North Carolina and has provided considerable love and support throughout the entire process. If I thanked you for everything you did, I would have another dissertation, so I will just say thank you for being my unwavering rock throughout it all. I love you from the bottom of my heart. Here’s to our next adventure.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES viii

LIST OF FIGURES ix

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER II: “WE STILL REMEMBER YOU”: THE MEMORIES OF HMONG REFUGEES FROM THE SECRET WAR 14

CHAPTER III: “I WOULD NEVER SEE MY HOMELAND AGAIN”: THE RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION OF HMONG REFUGEES 41

CHAPTER IV: “I REGRET THAT WE CAN’T RELAY ALL OUR PEOPLE’S HISTORIES: HISTORICAL MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE HMONG ... 71

CHAPTER V: “I AM PROUD TO BE HMONG:” THE EXPERIENCES OF THE YOUNGER HMONG GENERATIONS 100

CHAPTER VI: EPILOGUE 130

BIBLIOGRAPHY 142

APPENDIX A: CAST OF CHARACTERS 157

APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY 159

APPENDIX C: REFUGEE ARRIVAL DATA 165

LIST OF TABLES

Table C1. Southeast Asian Refugee Arrivals in the United States by Nationality, FY 1975-1989 165

Table C2. Southeast Asian Population in the United States, 1970 and 1980 166

Table C3. Refugees and Asylees Granted Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Selected Country of Birth, FY 1961-1988 166

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Tong Xiong in his military uniform serving as a CIA guerilla combatant 20

Figure 2. Neng Xiong's uncle was a Hmong solider who fought for the CIA 25

Figure 3. United Nations High Commission for Refugees paperwork belonging to a Hmong refugee, Ka Yeng Vang 32

Figure 4. Photograph of Kay Ying Lo and her two young daughters in La Crosse, Wisconsin ... 68

Figure 5. Silver bracelets worn in Hmong culture 76

Figure 6. Chia Yang made this embroidered story cloth while in the refugee camps. 81

Figure 7. A story cloth depicting the folklore, Ntxawm and the Tiger 82

Figure 8. A story cloth that made with the intention of being sold while in the refugee camp 84

Figure 9. Two motif examples 84

Figure 10. Kay Ying Lo's mother was a skilled at embroidery and sewin. 87

Figure 11. A close-up image of Kay Ying Lo's belt 88

Figure 12. An example of the home motif which is seen in Kay Ying Lo's belt 88

Figure 13. Kay Ying Lo (pictured middle) and friends wearing traditional Hmong dress at the 2011 Hmong New Year Festival in Newton, North Carolina 90

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

We were victims of fat tigers and foreign policy.
There is no Valhalla, only memories of Spectre gunships
There is no Elysium, only pleas from asylum.
The jungle is filthy.
There was shit. There was blood.
There were refugees.[1]

–"The Last War Poem" (Excerpt)
By Bryan Thao Worra

On a crisp Halloween morning, my car rolled into the Montgomery Community College parking lot in Troy, North Carolina, setting the stage for a meeting that would unfold with vibrancy. Stepping into the library, a few college students in costumes caught my eye as I made my way to the counter. There, I informed the librarian of my purpose—to meet Mr. Pang Vang, the Dean of Learning Resources and a Hmong refugee. With a decisive knock on his office door, the librarian announced my arrival, and I expressed my gratitude before turning my attention to an intriguing display of pottery. After just a few minutes, a reverberating voice called out my name. Swiftly turning around, I encountered an animated, smiling man extending his hand in greeting. He introduced himself and promptly led me into the conference room.

As we took our seats across from each other, exchanging pleasantries, the air was charged with an unspoken eagerness. Despite our prior phone and email conversations, this was our first face-to-face meeting. In a tone that defied the typical library ambiance, Pang began to passionately share his cultural heritage, family history, and the journey that brought him to the United States. His words resonated with urgency as he wished that the general American population understood that the Hmong are "just people" who can "make positive change."[2]

---

[1] Bryan Thao Worra, "The Last War Poem," in *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* ed. Mai Neng Moua (St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002): 98-99.

[2] Pang Vang, interviewed by the author, November 9, 2023.

***

The Second Indochina War emerged out of the struggle for control and independence in Southeast Asia that affected Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and the surrounding area. After World War II and the defeat of the French in 1954, the region was divided between communists and anti-communists. The conflict was deeply influenced by the ideological struggle of the Cold War, with the U.S. and its allies viewing it as a battle against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. The U.S. gradually escalated its involvement, initially providing financial and military aid to the anti-communists and then sending in combat troops in the early 1960s.

The Second Indochina War had profound and lasting effects. It caused immense human suffering and loss of life. It also led to a reevaluation of U.S. foreign policy and increased skepticism of military interventions. The conflicts in the region, including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, shaped geopolitics, influenced subsequent American military interventions, and left deep wounds on the individuals and cultures directly impacted. In Cambodia, the war contributed to the rise of the Khmer Rouge, a brutal regime responsible for the genocide of millions. Laos became the most heavily bombed country in history due to its strategic importance during the conflict. The aftermath in Vietnam left a legacy of political and social upheaval that shaped the region for decades.[3]

One repercussion of the Second Indochina War, that is often forgotten, is the Hmong Secret War. During the U.S. military interference in the region, Laos became a key battleground because of its crucial supply route, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, used by North Vietnamese forces to transport troops and supplies into South Vietnam. The U.S. wanted to disrupt this supply line so they enlisted the help of the Hmong people, an indigenous ethnic minority in Laos. The Hmong are originally from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. They have a strong sense of community where family and kin are highly valued. An integral part of Hmong religion is animism which emphasizes the spiritual essence of the natural environment, and Shamanism which branches the spiritual and material worlds. Within the Hmong culture, are eighteen "subcultures" known as clans and although there are some distinctions between clans, the Hmong population as a whole has maintained similar practices, culture, and language.[4] Despite experiencing persecution and displacement throughout their history, the Hmong have continued to find ways to practice their traditions and customs.

---

[3] The Vietnam War is sometimes referred to as the Second Indochina War because it was part of a broader conflict that unfolded in the Indochina region of Southeast Asia. The term “Second Indochina War” is used to highlight the broader scope of the conflict beyond just Vietnam.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited and trained the Hmong to fight against the communist forces in Laos, including the Pathēt Lao and North Vietnamese troops during the mid-twentieth century. The Hmong, with their knowledge of the rugged Laotian terrain, proved to be valuable allies in this secret campaign, and fought a guerilla war alongside American advisors, engaging in tactics like ambushes, sabotage, and intelligence gathering. They received support in the form of weapons, training, and logistical aid from the U.S. This conflict was kept secret due to the sensitive nature of U.S. involvement in Laos, which violated the country's official neutrality.[5] After the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, the U.S.

---

[4] Ya Pa Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010); G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010); Larry Long and Eileen Littig (producers), *Being Hmong Means Being Free: A Video Portrait of Hmong Life and Culture in Today's America* (Center for Asian American Media, 2000). In China, the Hmong are typically referred to as the Miao, but this has recently received harsh criticism and backlash from the Hmong population as Miao is used in a derogatory way. The Hmong outside of China prefer to be called Hmong or Mong while the Hmong population in China still refers to themselves as Miao. Louis Schein, "The Miao in Contemporary China" in*The Hmong in Transition*, Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard (eds) (Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1986): 73-86; Nicholas Tapp, "Cultural Accommodations in Southwest China: The 'Han Miao' and the Problems in the Ethnography of the Hmong," *Asian Folklore Studies* 61, no. 1 (2002): 77-104.

[5] Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountain: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

officially withdrew from Vietnam, but the Secret War in Laos continued until the Pathēt Lao gained control of the country 1975. Due to their alliance with the U.S. military, the Hmong were threatened with retaliation and persecution, prompting a mass exodus of Hmong refugees, many of whom resettled in the United States.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, many Hmong families fled their homes, seeking refuge in the jungles and mountains of Laos as they desperately tried to make it to refugee camps along the Thai-Lao border. These camps were often overcrowded and barely provided, and in some cases could not provide, the basic necessities to the refugees. Various countries, including the United States, recognized the plight of the Hmong and offered them permanent residency status. Starting in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, the U.S. government, along with resettlement agencies, facilitated the resettlement of Hmong refugees to the U.S. They were granted refugee status, allowing them to legally live and work in the country.

The 1980 Refugee Act, signed into law by President Jimmy Carter, was a landmark piece of legislation as it established an admission and resettlement process for refugees in the United States. The precedents set by displaced persons after World War II and Cuban refugee crisis of the 1960s influenced the drafting of the 1980 Refugee Act by emphasizing the need for a comprehensive framework to address diverse refugee situations and provide equitable resettlement opportunities. The Act, using the definition established by the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), defined a refugee as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to their home country due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, or political opposition.[6] Additionally, the 1980 Refugee Act established a system for setting an annual cap on the number of refugees that could be admitted to the U.S. This cap is determined by the President in consultation with Congress.[7]

---

[6] United States Congress, Refugee Act of 1980, PL 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980). There

The formal admissions process of refugees to the U.S., established by the 1980 Refugee Act, included intense screening, interviews, and medical examinations conducted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of State (DOS). The Act outlined specific categories of individuals who may be given priority for resettlement, such as those facing security concerns or in need of legal protection. Preference for refugee admissions were often given to displaced persons who worked directly with the U.S. or tied to the U.S. government in some manner. For example, South Vietnamese and Hmong soldiers who fought with the U.S. military where often prioritized for admission to the U.S.[8] The 1980 Refugee Act also established a system of public-private partnership for the resettlement of refugees which involved the collaboration between the federal government, state and local agencies. The Act aimed to provide refugees with the necessary support for their successful integration into American society which included language and job training, as well as other forms of assistance, but in practice this support often fell short.[9]

---

[7] United States Congress, Refugee Act of 1980, PL 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980). There are a handful of significant dates regarding American twentieth century immigration policy including: the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924 which employed harsher requirements for immigrants entering the county and implemented a quota system; the Bracero Program which temporarily allowed Mexican farmers into the U.S. to fill labor shortages; the McCarren-Walter Act of 1952 which formally ended the exclusion of Asian immigrants to the U.S.; the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which ended the 1920 national quota system that favored certain racial and ethnic groups; and the Refugee Act of 1980 which became the first piece of U.S. legislation to specifically address refugees as defined by the United Nations. Since the 1980s, other important legislation regarding immigration policy includes the 2001 Development, Relief, and Education of Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

[8] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, Cal.: Oakland University Press, 2020), 7-90.

[9] The 1980 Refugee Act also included provisions for asylum seekers, allowing individuals who meet the definition of a refugee to apply for protection while already in the U.S. Over the years, there have been amendments and adjustments to the refugee policy in response to changing global circumstances. For example, there have been adjustments to the annual admissions ceiling in response to geopolitical events and crises. In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, there were heightened security measures introduced for the admission of

Contemporary research in migration history emphasizes understanding the identity of migrants as a dynamic process rather than a fixed concept.[10] This shift involves exploring various aspects, such as gender, race, and socio-economic status. Additionally, recent scholarship has increasingly directed attention towards investigating historical memory and narratives within specific migrant communities.[11] This includes the study of oral histories, personal testimonies, and the ways in which displaced populations remember and recount their experiences.[12] The historiography of migration studies, more broadly, and refugee resettlement and integration, more specifically, is a dynamic field that addresses the evolving challenges faced by displaced populations and the societies that receive them. It engages with a wide range of disciplines, including history, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, law, and political science, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of refugee studies.

A subfield within migration historiography focuses on refugees. Refugee history has emerged as a significant area of scholarly inquiry, driven by an interest in understanding the experiences of individuals and communities affected by wars, disasters, and geopolitical changes. The term “refugee crisis” gained prominence in Western media in recent years, leading to a growth in scholarship within the field. Currently, refugee history operates without a

---

refugees. This included enhanced background checks and security screenings. Also, for further definitions on the differences between refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, etc., please see the glossary.

[10] Migration and migrant are used to mean any person who moves across boundaries whether that is an immigrant, refugee, or asylum seeker. For more definitions, please see the glossary.

[11] Luisa Passerini, Gabriele Proglio, and Milicia Trakilović, eds, *The Mobility of Memory: Migration and Diasporas Across European Borders* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021). Patricia Chu, *Where I Have Never Been: Migration, Melancholia, and Memory in Asian American Narratives of Return* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019). Dominic Meng-Hsuan Yang, *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[12] Bronwyn Winter and Cat Moi, eds. *Reformation, Revolution and Crisis in Europe: Landmarks in History, Memory, and Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2020); Victoria Aarons and Alan L. Berger. *Third-Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2017); Linda Ho Peche, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Yuong Vu, eds. *Toward a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

comprehensive conceptual framework, despite the abundance of recent contributions that expand the scope of the field.[13] This scholarship has been influenced by various historiographical approaches, including methodological nationalism, the transnational turn, and debates in labor history, women's history, gender history, and the history of slavery.[14] However, some scholars have recently developed a new methodology called "refugeedom."[15] Refugeedom acknowledges the roles of states and international actors in "defining refugees," but it also emphasizes the importance of recognizing refugees as active historical agents within situations of crisis and constraint. This approach provides a promising framework for analyzing instances and locations of mass population displacement while integrating the experiences of refugees themselves to consider how they narrate their stories of displacement.[16]

Within displacement and refugee history, several ethnic groups have been scrutinized including the Irish, Italians, and Vietnamese, but the Hmong have largely been overlooked. The few stories that have been published on the Hmong have often either been personal memoirs, focusing on the Hmong populations in California, Minneapolis, and Wisconsin, or generalizations of the Hmong experience.[17] The story of the Hmong in North Carolina has largely been discounted. Examining this history of Hmong refugees contributes significantly to the larger historiography of refugee history by shedding light on overlooked narratives and addressing broader themes of migration, refugee policies, cultural integration, and globalization. The Hmong community in North Carolina provides a compelling case study, illustrating their journey of forced displacement, resettlement, and integration into American society. This dissertation primarily focuses on emphasizing the voices of refugees as they tell their story of resettlement, integration, and cultural adjustment. While refugee camps are a crucial part of the historiography of forced displacement and migration history, that is not the focus of this dissertation which is more concerned with how refugees integrated and adjusted to life in the U.S. after their immediate resettlement. By examining the Hmong community in North Carolina, historians can explore the unique challenges faced by the Hmong who predominately resettled in rural areas of a Southern state and explore their agency in overcoming adversity. This case study offers insights into the broader themes of mass displacement, diasporas, and the management of refugee populations as it offers a global history from a local perspective. Moreover, the integration of refugee history and global history provides a broader understanding of migration patterns and the complexities of cultural integration in diverse societies.

---

[13] Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, "What is refugee history, now?" *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 1 (2022): 1-2.

[14] For key works in migration history, please see: Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (2nd ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1985); Alan M. Kraut, *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921* (1982; 2nd ed. Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 2001); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955); Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2000); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). Please note that this is not an extensive list.

[15] Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, "What is refugee history, now?"

[16] Lauren Banko, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell, "What is refugee history, now?"

After arriving in the United States, most Hmong refugees relocated from their initial city placements, seeking proximity to family, improved climates, or better employment prospects. Despite facing language barriers, the Hmong earnestly sought employment, often encountering ongoing difficulties. Consequently, many Hmong worked in factories or pursued independent farming ventures. While integrating into American life posed challenges, the Hmong's collective values fostered community support, with individuals aiding fellow refugees in securing work, housing, and interpretation services. As refugee populations surged, particularly in states like California, strains on resources emerged, prompting state officials and lawmakers to advocate for Southeast Asian refugees to relocate eastward. With over one-third of refugees entering the U.S. via California, government officials noted significant impediments to the state's job market and social service capacity. To alleviate these pressures, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) initiated a pilot program, the Favorable Alternate Sites Project, later known as the Planned Secondary Resettlement Program, aimed at relocating refugees to regions with lower welfare dependency and better job opportunities. North Carolina and Georgia emerged as favorable relocation destinations due to their promising employment prospects.[18]

---

[17] Mary Louise Buley-Meissner and Vincent K. Her, *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2012); Ma Vang, *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Kou Yang, *The Making of Hmong America: Forty Years After the Secret War* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017); Chia Youyee Vang, *An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

The federal government advocated for secondary migration of refugees to states like North Carolina and Georgia primarily due to the availability of job markets that better suited the backgrounds of the Hmong. According to Linda Gordon, a statistician at HHS, the initial wave of refugees post-Vietnam War consisted mostly of Vietnamese with white-collar backgrounds and English proficiency, whereas later arrivals, including Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians, were more likely to be blue-collar workers. Despite concerns about resource saturation, officials from federal, state, and private sectors saw advantages in resettling refugees in North Carolina, citing ample entry-level manufacturing jobs, affordable housing, and a climate reminiscent of Southeast Asia. Some state officials argued that the lifestyle similarities between native-born North Carolinians and the incoming refugees, particularly the Hmong and Montagnard, facilitated integration. Raleigh Bailey, director of refugee programs for Lutheran Family Services and future founder of the Center for New North Carolinians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, highlighted the compatibility between the rural backgrounds of Indochinese refugees and North Carolinians. Moreover, the existing sizable Hmong population in North Carolina by the mid-1980s provided a supportive community for new arrivals. While some officials supported the program, others expressed pessimism about its sustainability. Despite successful evaluations, the Planned Secondary Resettlement Program ultimately ended due to a lack of additional funding, as predicted by Carol Leviton Wetterhahn, a consultant on resettlement issues for the Department of State.[19]

---

[18] Deborah Kogan and Mary Vencill, "An Evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project: Final Report," sponsored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and Berkley Planning Association, (October 1984), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED268201.pdf and Richard C. Baiz, "Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) FY 1985 National Discretionary Activities Plan," received by All County Welfare Directors, Department of Social Services, March 6, 1985, Sacramento, California, https://www.cdss.ca.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acin85/I-25-85.pdf. "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs." *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1986, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-12-08-mn-1865-story.html

Over the last fifty years, the Hmong have integrated into American culture and become valuable members of their local communities, particularly in states like California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Hickory, North Carolina in Catawba County has the fifth largest Hmong population in the U.S. In early 2017, Catawba County Library partnered with the Historical Association and Digital Heritage NC to collect and curate a digital collection of Hmong material artifacts and oral histories to both preserve and promote awareness and understanding of Hmong culture and history. Around the same time, the Archives and Special Collections at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted oral history interviews with Hmong Americans to add to their Southern Oral History Program. In addition to what was available in these archives, I interviewed a handful of Hmong refugees and second-generation

---

[19] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

Hmong Americans about their childhood, culture, and integration into American society. The names of the individuals whose stories are in the archives have remained the same. The names of the individuals I interviewed have been changed for their privacy.[20]

To address these broader themes of forced displacement, resettlement, and integration, this dissertation is divided into four chapters which follows a rough chronology. Chapter one provides context on the Hmong Secret War from the perspectives of Hmong refugees who eventually resettled to North Carolina. It explores how the Hmong were recruited by the U.S. military and CIA to assist with covert operations and guerilla attacks against the communist regime, Pathēt Lao, along the border of Laos. The fall of Laos in 1975, marked the displacement of the Hmong from their homeland. Their plight was just a fraction of the broader refugee crisis sparked by the wars, prompting global discussions on humanitarian efforts and refugee policies. While geopolitical debates raged, voices like Pai Lee, Neng Xiong, Chia Yang, Tong Xiong, and Bee Chong Kao Vang, among others, emphasized the human toll of war and displacement. Trauma, both physical and emotional, lingered for refugees like Neng Xiong, whose memories of loss and survival continue to haunt him, echoing the unresolved stories of those left behind in the Laotian jungles.

The second chapter will examine the experiences of Hmong refugees during their initial resettlement to the United States. It will map their journey from arrival to finding permanent residence in North Carolina. Upon arrival to the U.S., some refugees, like Pai Lee and Xiong

---

[20] Find the Catawba County Library and Historical Association Digital Heritage NC collection at www.digitalnc.org. Find the Southern Oral History Program Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill at www.sohp.org. and in the Sothern Historical Collection at Wilson Library. Today, North Carolina is second in refugee resettlement on the U.S. east coast, only behind New York. Annually, North Carolina welcomes four percent of the refugee arrivals to the U.S. Greensboro, welcomes nearly a third of those. “Archives,” Refugee Processing Center, https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/

Lor, reunited with family members already in the country, while others, like Bee Chong Kao Vang, sought to reunify with loved ones left behind in Laos. Although most Hmong refugees originally land in other U.S. cities, many Hmong eventually migrated to North Carolina, primarily concentrating in the western part off the state, in part to employment opportunities and the growing Hmong community, but also because of the similar scenery and environment to Laos. Despite the challenges, Hmong collective values fostered community support, yet they still longed for their homeland. While some refugees, like Tou Lee, found solace in the North Carolina mountains, reminiscent of their Laotian terrain, others, like Neng Xiong, expressed gratitude for the sacrifices made for their newfound freedom, though not without profound sadness for those left behind.

Chapter three will examine the continued integration of the Hmong to the U.S. through material culture. It will also touch on themes of how Hmong refugees used cultural practices and traditions to become economically self-sufficient while preserving Hmong customs and the memories of those lost in the war. While some customs have waned since the war, the Hmong persist in practicing their traditions, sharing them through embroidery, farming, and oral storytelling. Despite losses suffered during their flight from Laos, the Hmong remain steadfast in passing down their cultural legacy to future generations, fearing its erosion amidst changing times. Filial piety, deeply ingrained in Hmong values, underscores their reverence for elders and commitment to communal bonds, shaping their collective resilience in the face of adversity. Some Hmong refugees, such as Neng Xiong, grappled with the weight of preserving his culture, and sought forgiveness from his ancestors for any shortcomings, lamenting the challenges of transmitting Hmong history amid displacement and generational shifts.

The fourth and final chapter will examine the refugees who were young children when they first arrived to the U.S. as well as the children of Hmong refugees born in the U.S.—the second-generation of Hmong Americans—and the struggles and challenges they faced as their families continued to integrate into American culture including: language barriers, the residual effects of generational trauma, and conflicts with identity. Reflecting on her childhood, Mylo Lor, a second-generation Hmong American, expressed a longing to integrate, yearning to blend in with her peers despite her distinct family background. While second-generation Hmong Americans may not have directly experienced the horrors of the Secret War or refugee camps, they faced their own challenges in navigating between American society and their Hmong community. Intergenerational trauma, subtly passed down through generations, manifested in challenges of identity, cultural understanding, and integration into American society for young Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans alike. Despite the hardships, both Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans take pride in their cultural heritage, striving to uphold their identity amidst the complexities of integrating into the U.S.

The epilogue will briefly discuss the initiatives Hmong Americans are doing today. It will primarily focus on the work of a relatively new non-profit organization, the North Carolina Hmong Women Association and their enduring commitment to their community. The epilogue will also quickly touch on the new U.S. government refugee policy that was rolled out in 2023, Welcome Corps, which now allows for private groups to sponsor refugees. In the decades to come, this new program could potentially be added to the short list of significant dates to know in regards to refugee and immigration history.

CHAPTER II: "WE STILL REMEMBER YOU": THE MEMORIES OF HMONG REFUGEES FROM THE SECRET WAR

Many, many years ago, all the world was a rock and humans lived far under the ground with their families.

As it so happened, one day a man and his wife were following their dog that was chasing a monkey through an endless rock tunnel. After a long trip they emerged on the surface of the world, a great black flat rock.

They returned home, gathered seeds and worms, and brought them to the surface. Soon the seeds sprang up, the worms multiplied, and life on the earth began.[21]

– "The Beginning of the World"
Hmong Folk Story

Pai Lee, was one of thousands of Hmong refugees who faced the horrors of war. Although Pai Lee survived with her young daughter and sister, she faced a harrowing journey that was not without loss. She was badly injured during a bombing of her village in the 1970s that left her with a limp which provides her with a constant reminder of her sacrifices. Not only did she lose her homeland, she lost family members. "It was in the middle of the war, the Vietnam War," Pai Lee recounted, "My uncle was in the army, my dad's brother was in the army and he was killed."[22]

Half a century ago, the Hmong were forced underground with their families as they fled for their lives through the jungles of Laos. While the Vietnam War is well-remembered in American history, the effects on the surrounding regions and its peoples are often overlooked. The Vietnam War was only one of several conflicts in Southeast Asia during the mid-twentieth century as violence escalated throughout the region in an attempt to “stop the spread of communism.” The Cambodian and Laotian Civil Wars—and by extension, the Hmong Secret War—were also of interest to the American government and were conflicts fought between communists and anti-communists. As the name suggests, the Hmong Secret War was a relatively unknown paramilitary operation which has left the Hmong refugees in the shadows of American memory. While the general American public may have forgotten about the Hmong, the images and horrors of these wars still haunt the regions and memories of those alive today. After the fall of Vientiane, the capital of Laos, in 1975, the Hmong were never able to return home and were forced to continue their lives with the lingering memories of the decimation of their homes and the deaths of their loved ones.

---

[21] Norma Livo and Dia Cha, "The Beginning of the World" in *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam* (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991) 33.

[22] Pai Lee interview by Emmanuel Lee, July 27, 2018 in Morganton, North Carolina, interview and transcript, Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28570/rec/3

The end of the wars in Southeast Asia resulted in a significant refugee crisis which led to global discussions regarding displaced populations. After 1975, the global community, including countries like the United States, Thailand, and international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR) engaged in broader discussions on humanitarian efforts, refugee policies, and international cooperation to mitigate the crisis. The Hmong were just one demographic of Southeast Asian refugees forced to leave their homeland, but their voices allow for a nuanced understanding of refugees’ experiences of displacement. By examining Hmong refugees and centering their voices, scholars can gain insight on how refugees define themselves and add to their subjectivity in a discussion that is often policy-centric.[23] While geopolitical debates are important, it is also crucial to center the voices of those who experienced the trauma and effects of war, persecution, death, and displacement, such as from stories like Pai Lee, Neng Xiong, Chia Yang, Tong Xiong, Bee Chong Kao Vang, and others. During their trials of displacement and resettlement, some Hmong refugees found permanent residence in North Carolina, eventually becoming the state with the fourth largest Hmong population in the country.

The Laotian Civil War was a long and devastating conflict that took place between 1954 and 1975. The war was fought between the communist Pathēt Lao forces and the Royal Lao Government, with both sides receiving support from foreign powers, including the Northern Vietnamese Army, the Southern Vietnamese Army, and U.S. troops. The conflict was fueled by ideological differences and struggles for power, as well as by the larger geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. The fighting in Laos caused extensive damage to infrastructure and the economy, and it also had a significant impact on the people of the country, including the displacement of thousands of refugees. The Hmong Secret War was a covert CIA-backed operation that took place during the Laotian Civil War. The Hmong people, an indigenous, ethnic minority group from the mountainous region of Laos, were recruited by the CIA to assist with guerrilla warfare and intelligence gathering and fought alongside the United States and the Royal Lao Government. In the end, the Pathēt Lao emerged victorious, and the country was officially declared a communist state in 1975. The end of the war brought violent persecution for the Hmong.[24]

---

[23] Please see Jana Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2020) and Laura Madokoro, *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold* War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016). Lipman and Madokoro both provide crucial contributions to studies of forced displacement and international policies related to refugees. Lipman provides a contribution to critical refugee studies by examining the experiences of Vietnamese asylum seekers in Southeast Asian refugee camps after the Vietnam War, highlighting the political negotiations within these camps and challenging the simplistic narratives of refugee resettlement, while emphasizing the agency of refugees and the diverse responses of host countries. Madokoro offers a pioneering examination of Chinese refugees fleeing the People's Republic of China from the 1950s to the 1980s, focusing on the international response and the shaping of refugee discourse by Western humanitarians and governments, highlighting comparative migration and deportation policies, and providing individual narratives alongside archival sources.

CIA interference began in the 1950s when U.S. Special Operations, a partnership between the CIA and U.S. military, began training guerrilla warfare tactics to Laotian soldiers. Major General of the Royal Lao Family, Vang Pao, recruited the Hmong and others to fight as allies with U.S. forces, in part because President John F. Kennedy refused to send any additional forces to Southeast Asia. Kennedy requested that the U.S. military use Asian recruits to launch guerrilla attacks against the communist forces in the region.[25] The hailed Hmong hero and major general of the Royal Lao Army, Vang Pao, and the CIA took Kennedy's statement as a call to action.[26]

---

[24] Kenneth J. Conboy and James Morrison, *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos* (Boulder, Co: Paladin Press, 1995): 2-5. Timothy Castle, *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 140-145; Sutayut Osornprasop, "Amidst the Heat of the Cold War in Asia: Thailand and the America Secret War in Indochina (1960-74)," *Cold War History* 7, no. 3 (2007): 349-371.

[25] Thoma Ahern, Jr. *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006): 102-110.

[26] Richard H. Shultz, Jr. *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (Perennial, 2000), 17. See also, Thomas Ahern, Jr. *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations Into North Vietnam, 1961-1964* (Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005): 13. William Leary, *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia* (Tuscaloosa, Al.: University of Alabama Press, 2006): vii-x.

Hmong soldiers were guerilla combatants for the CIA and became the primary recruits to fight against the communist-backed Pathēt Lao.[27] With the support of U.S. resources, the Hmong guerrillas delivered forty-six million pounds of food, transported tens of thousands of troops, executed highly effective photo-reconnaissance missions, and participated in a number of covert missions using advanced technology.[28] In particular, the U.S. hoped to use the Hmong to disrupt the North Vietnamese supply lines on the Ho Chi Minh trail through Laos. The CIA also used the Hmong to provide intelligence, guard a U.S. radar station, and act as a rescue team for American pilots who were shot down.[29]

The war was tumultuous. One refugee, Bee Chong Kao Vang, recalled his family sleeping in "the forests and jungles because there were constantly bombs and bullets flying so you couldn't stay in the village and in your homes."[30] Still, that did not deter the Hmong from enlisting to fight in the war. Nhia Thong Yang, a Hmong soldier and refugee, recalled his experience, "I was involved in the war since June 9, 1963…I served as a soldier and was at the front lines."[31] Nhia proudly served alongside his five brothers and they all "helped our country in the war."[32] Nhia elaborated on his war experience, "I want to let people know that war was not easy. You had to live in the jungle and leave your wife and children behind at home and you would be gone for 3 or 4 months before you got to return. Some never made it back home."[33] Another Hmong soldier, Tong Xiong, was only fifteen when he enlisted. He recalled one event when he and his squad were ordered to be stationed near an airport in Luang Prabang, a city in northern Laos, where the Vietnamese had "set fire to the airplanes" and "dropped bombs from high up."[34] When Tong and his troop arrived "everything was already rusted and burned away but the Vietnamese were still there so we chased the Vietnamese out."[35]

---

[27] Since this dissertation primarily focuses on resettlement and integration, the recruiting and fighting of the Secret War falls out of scope. However, there have been several books and documentaries on the subject. If interested, some suggestions include: Jane Hamilton-Meritt, *The Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Roger Warner, *Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995); Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong and America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000); and Chia Youyee Vang, *Fly Until You Die: An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019). Roger Wagner, *Back Fire: The CIA's Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam*, (New York: Simon &Schuster, 1995).

[28] William Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974: Supporting the 'Secret War,'" *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1999-2000) 4-12. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/CIA-Air-Ops-Laos.pdf

[29] William Leary, "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974: Supporting the 'Secret War,'" 12-19.

[30] Bee Chong Kao Vang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106799?ln=en

[31] Nhia Thong Yang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en

Unfortunately for Tong Xiong and Nhia Thong Yang, the future of Laos was grim. The Pathēt Lao slowly began moving toward Vientiane. The end of the war was evident, forcing the Hmong to seek safety outside the borders of Laos to avoid persecution and death. Nhia remembered his battalion being sent back to the military base, Long Tiengg, when he said "we were sent back to Long Tieng and we were engaged in battle… we were at war all the way until 1975 when the country was lost and the war was over."[36] Tong recalled the day when American soldiers told him that "they weren't paying us [the Hmong troops] anymore because they [the

---

[32] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

[33] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

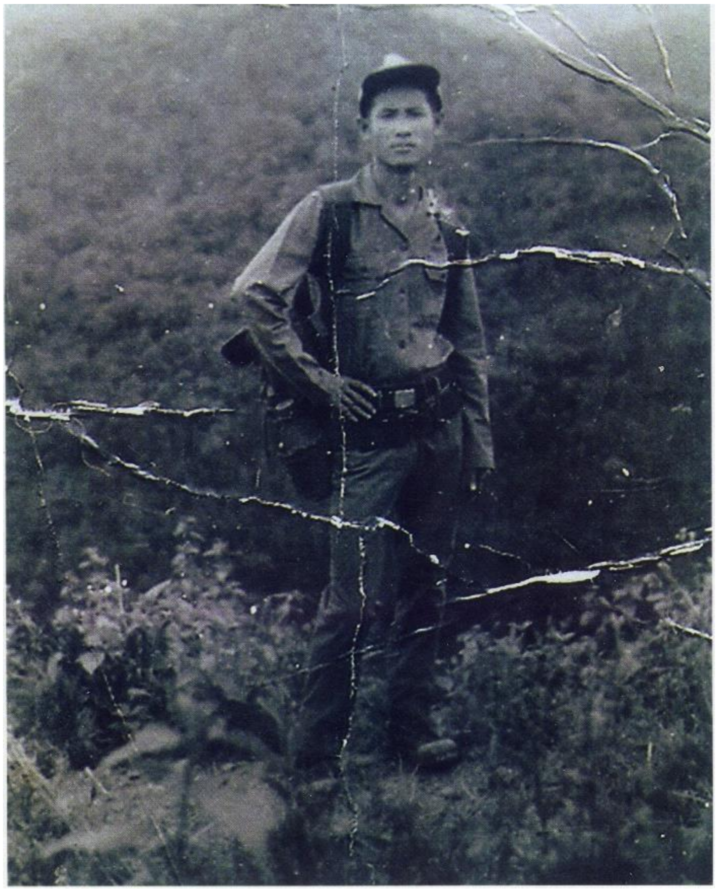
[34] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, interview by Touger Vang, February 18, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106794?ln=en

[35] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

[36] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

U.S. soldiers] were about to leave."[37] The American soldiers advised Tong and his squad to "stay close to Thailand so if the country fell, we [the Hmong] could flee into Thailand."[38]

Figure 1. Tong Xiong in his military uniform serving as a CIA guerilla combatant. Contributed by Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



The fall of Vientiane began in May 1975 when the Pathēt Lao launched a major offensive attack against the capital. The Royal Lao Government forces were quickly overwhelmed. Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister of Laos, called for Major General Vang Pao to cooperate with the communists in May of 1975. Pao aggressively denied these orders when he stripped the stars from his collar and stormed out of the room.[39] Only days later, in a Pathēt Lao newspaper, it was warned that the Hmong people would be exterminated "to the last root."[40] On the eve of Vientiane, Vang Pao, realized the grave situation of the Hmong when the Pathēt Lao captured the city in August. On December 2, 1975, King Savang Vatthana, the last king of Laos, abdicated and Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister, resigned. Vientiane had fallen.[41]

---

[37] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.
[38] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

As the Pathēt Lao marched on Vientiane and the U.S. military base, Long Tiengg, evacuation of the region began. Jerry Daniels, a U.S. CIA Paramilitary Operations Officer, stayed in Long Tiengg to help with the immediate evacuation of the Hmong. At the time, Daniels only had one aircraft, so he decided to contact brigadier General Heinie Aderholt in Bangkok to send additional planes to help with the evacuation. Three pilots and two additional aircrafts were sent to Long Tiengg.[42] The three aircrafts were able to make four trips each to Udorn, Thailand. General Vang Pao and Jerry Daniels narrowly escaped along with an estimated one to three thousand Hmong refugees.[43] Unfortunately, the evacuation was cut short as the Pathēt Lao arrived the next day.[44]

The immediate evacuation of the Hmong after the fall of Vientiane was a chaotic and traumatic event. With the communist Pathēt Lao forces in control, the Hmong people were at risk of persecution and violence due to their relationship with the United States and the Royal

---

[39] Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010): 54.

[40] Connie Lauerman, "Back to the Land," *Chicago Tribune*, October 1, 1989, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-10-01-8901180367-story.html

[41] Merle L. Pribbenow, trans, *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People's Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2002): 302.

[42] Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992*, 54-60.

[43] Ya Po Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010): 16-20.

[44] Kou Yang, *The Making of Hmong America: Forty Years after the Secret War* (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2017): 61-70; Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992*, 55-60, 204.

Lao Government. As a result, the U.S. and other Western nations launched a large-scale evacuation effort to rescue as many Hmong refugees as possible. The evacuation involved a series of helicopter and airplane airlifts from Laos to neighboring countries such as Thailand, where Hmong refugees could seek temporary safety and asylum.[45] As the Pathēt Lao victory grew increasingly more inevitable, panic ensued and many Hmong followed General Vang Pao to Thailand whether by aircraft, by foot, or by rafts. Hmong refugee, Pai Lee recalled the chaos, "I just knew that we had to escape from the Vietnamese and the Laos army…and to escape to Thailand because our general of our Hmong people, he had already fled to America, so, I just knew that we needed to follow him for safety."[46] The possibility of death through starvation, dehydration, execution, or bombs was a devastating and daily reality refugees were forced to face. Some succeeded in escaping with their families to Thailand, however, others were unsuccessful.[47] By December of 1975, an estimated forty-four thousand Hmong had fled to Thailand through the jungles when communist takeover in Laos officially occurred and the country became the Lao People's Democratic Republic.[48]

The year 1975 largely signifies the victory of communist forces in Southeast Asia. Whether Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos, those who fought alongside U.S. military were under threat of death. Neng Xiong recalled how the fear of persecution resulted in the Hmong fleeing into the jungles. He said, "For our Hmong people, when the war ended in '75, those who were able to flee with General Vang Pao were able to escape but for the rest of us who fell behind, most ran into hiding in the jungles like me and my family."[49] When the loss of Laos was foreseeable, Tong Xiong frantically returned home to help his family escape only to discover that his family had already left. He somberly recalled, "One of the saddest things for me was that when I went off to be a soldier, my mom and family ran away and didn't wait for me to return."[50]

---

[45] Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992*, 54-60.

[46] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.

[47] Sutayut Osornprasop. "Amidst the Heat of the Cold War in Asia," 349-371.

[48] Jennifer Yau, "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, January 1, 2005, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/foreign-born-hmong-united-states

Another Hmong refugee, Pai Lee, was also abandoned by her family. She married her first husband in Laos in 1974 and a year later gave birth to their daughter. A few months after giving birth, their village was bombed, Pai was injured, and her husband fled. She recalled that "because I was injured, he [her husband] left me and my daughter in the woods, and he was able to escape to Thailand without me."[51] It took Pai Lee ten years to get to Thailand before she was able to see her husband again. Pai heartbreakingly recalled the reunification with her first husband when she said, "I was able to reunite with my first husband, he had already gotten a new wife with kids."[52] Pai Lee and her first husband divorced in Thailand, before she and her daughter were resettled in the United States.[53]

Bee Chong Kao Vang, another Hmong refugee, remembered his escape from Laos to Thailand. Born in Laos in 1958, Bee Chong's early life primarily consisted of violence and bloodshed. He attended school in Vientiane until about sixth grade before he and his family finally escaped from Laos to Thailand. He remembered the chaos of crossing into Thailand when he commented, "After the end of the war, the Hmong soldiers and Hmong people flooded into Thailand. There was four of us that helped the Hmong cross the Mekong River to the Thailand side for about 4 or 5 months. Every night we would send hundreds of people under cover of darkness to the other side. After that, around June 11, 1975, fewer people were coming and the Laotian forbade it so I finally crossed into Thailand."[54]

---

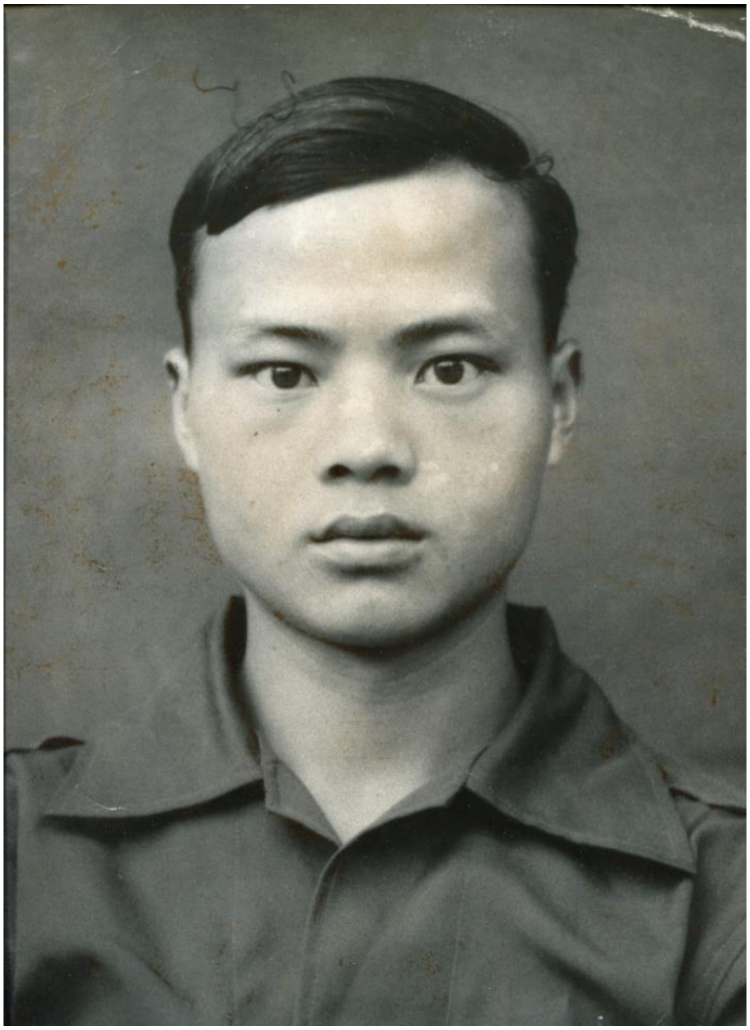
[49] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[50] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.
[51] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[52] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[53] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.

While Bee Chong and others escaped Laos and found temporary safety in Thailand within a few months after Vientiane fell, it took years for other Hmong refugees. Neng Xiong, a Hmong refugee and former CIA guerrilla combatant, "hid for 6 or 7 years in the jungle" before making it to Thailand.[55] Recalling the harrowing journey he faced, he commented, "When we were fleeing into Thailand, it wasn't as easy as the first group that fled when the General [Vang Pao] fled."[56] Neng said, "it took about 15 days traveling through the thick jungle" to the Mekong River.[57] He carried "a bag of rice that was so heavy you could barely carry it" and even then, the Hmong were still at risk of starvation before arriving to the river. Those that did make it, still faced the risk of drowning while attempting to cross the Mekong.[58] Neng Xiong conveyed remorse and guilt for the Hmong that did not find safety in Thailand. He explained, "…out of 100 only 70 or 80 might make it…their blood and bodies made a way and make it possible for all the others to escape to Thailand."[59] Although many Hmong gave their lives to help others flee, not everyone was able to escape to Thailand and "even to this day there are still those who are still hiding in the jungles, those who can't come out of hiding."[60]

---

[54] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.
[55] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[56] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[57] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[58] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[59] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.
[60] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.

Figure 2. Neng Xiong's uncle was a Hmong solider who fought for the CIA. He unfortunately died during the War. Contributed by Neng Xiong. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



In 1975, following the Pathēt Lao victory in Laos, Ban Vinai a camp in Thailand, was established in response to the influx of refugees. At its peak, the camp housed over 45,000 refugees, and although life was challenging due to the lack of resources, it offered many Hmong temporary refuge. Thailand granted the Hmong asylum, under the impression that they would either return to Laos or find permanent resettlement in a third country. However, due to the fear of persecution and death, many Hmong refugees refused to return to Laos but were also reluctant to leave for an industrial society as the Hmong were a more agrarian culture.[61] Over time, refugees were resettled in countries such as the United States, France, and Australia.[62]

Although the Hmong refugees who fled Laos and made it to Thailand evaded immediate death from the Pathēt Lao, arrival to the camps did not necessarily mean safety and comfort. Ellen Bruno who worked for the American Embassy as a political asylum caseworker for several refugee camps in the region, largely referred to camps as "a total shithole."[63] Most Hmong found temporary refuge to the Ban Vinai refugee site which was located on the border of Laos and Thailand, South of the Mekong River. The camp was approximately four-hundred acres and included makeshift shelters and facilities such as administration buildings, housing, and health centers. It had no electricity, running water, or sewage systems. Ban Vinai eventually came to resemble an oversized and overpopulated Hmong village.[64]

In the late 1970s, the global community engaged in intense debates regarding the responsibility for the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The United States advocated for first-asylum countries, like Thailand, to admit all refugees, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) facilitated processing for permanent resettlement in third countries, such as the United States. However, refugee camps quickly became overpopulated and first-asylum countries often did not have the capacity or resources for adequate care. As a result, many refugee camps, including Ban Vinai, began turning away refugees, even “pushing back” the boats and rafts Hmong refugees used to cross the Mekong River. U.S. official, Robert Winter, who had visited the camps along the Thai-Lao border explained that the “push back” policy was significantly affecting Hmong refugees as hundreds were turned away over a two-month period.[65] Refugees attempting to avoid persecution became increasingly more desperate.[66] The U.S. government urged Thailand and other first-asylum countries to continue with the admission of those seeking refuge, with the UNHCR providing infrastructure and resources, however, tensions continued escalating as first-asylum countries did not think refugees were being resettled quickly enough and were putting a strain on the countries’ resources. Countries like Thailand began to question the commitment of the U.S. to human rights and refugee resettlement.[67]

---

[61] Further discussion of Hmong culture will be discussed in the third chapter.

[62] Kou Yang, *The Making of Hmong America: Forty Years after the Secret War*, 61-70; Faith Nibbs; "Belonging: The Resettlement Experiences of Hmong Refugees in Texas and Germany," *Migration Policy Institute* (2014), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belonging-resettlement-experiences-hmong-refugees-texas-and-germany. Steve Gunderson, "State Department Outlines Resettlement Guidelines for Hmong Refugees," *Congressional Press Release* (May 1998).

[63] Ellen Bruno (activist and filmmaker), interview by the author, September 23, 2022.

[64] Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992*, 47-61. W. Court Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response* (London: Zed Books, 1998): 120.

Thailand and other first-asylum countries became increasingly more irritated in what they perceived as a lack-luster response from the international community in helping to quickly find permanent resettlement for refugees. Despite the increasing pressure, the UNHCR was able to convince first-asylum countries—including Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and Indonesia—to agree to not “push-off” boats who contained refugees looking for safety. Additionally, the UNHCR promised first-asylum countries additional funding and guaranteed to find permanent resettlement of arriving refugees in other countries.[68]

---

[65] Roger Winter, “Hmong Pushed Back At Laos-Thai Border,” *New York Times*, June 28, 1985.

[66] The Vietnamese boat people were refugees who desperately sought safety and would sail on make shift rafts and small fishing boats. Unfortunately, many died by drowning, sun exhaustion, starvation, or murdered by pirates. Those who did survive experienced sexual assault, rape, or other forms of violence as many were exploited receive passage on a fishing boat; a boat that was not guaranteed to be found by U.S. troops. For examples on Vietnamese boat people, please see: Lynda Mannik, *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016) and Nghia M. Vo, *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2006).

[67] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, Cal.: Oakland University Press, 2020), 74.

[68] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*, 80.

By the end of 1978, the United States already admitted roughly 100,000 Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodian refugees.[69] However, the Thai government continued to criticize the U.S. approach to refugee resettlement.[70] The U.S. maintained its stringent and exhausting application and interview process, only further angering the Thai government as they viewed this process as an immigration practice rather than a proper and quick response to a humanitarian refugee crisis.[71] Even though the U.S. admitted over 100,000 Southeast Asian refugees in 1978, it only provided little relief when the number of refugees was quickly approaching three million.[72]

In an attempt to mitigate the rising international tensions, the U.S. government implemented the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) in 1979 as a way to facilitate the legal and organized departure of refugees. ODP offices were opened at several refugee sites across the region including Bangkok, Thailand, and Vietnam.[73] Eligible refugees were provided with a structured process to leave their home countries and to resettle in the United States and other participating countries including Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and France, among others. The program focused on addressing humanitarian needs and preventing dangerous attempts at fleeing. However, the ODP faced significant challenges including limited quotas, stringent eligibility criteria, slow processing times, bureaucratic hurdles, inequitable access, and changing policies.[74]

---

[69] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010): 16-20.

[70] For complete data, please see the appendix.

[71] “The Hmong in America.” *Wilson Quarterly*, 9, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 22-24.

[72] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *The State of the World’s Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 81. Sucheng Chan, *Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006): 68-69; U.S. Comptroller General, *The Indochinese Exodus: A Humanitarian Dilemma*, April 24, 1979, pg. 49.

[73] The Orderly Departure Program closed in 1999.

A priority system was implemented and categorized refugees based on family ties, past employment with the U.S., or collaboration with U.S. programs. Hmong refugees were often prioritized due to their military ties in the Secret War although not always. Nhia Thong Yang elaborated on the process,

> When we [the Hmong] were coming, those who worked with the C.I.A., the Sky [Skyhook- CIA aerial retrieval], or the U.S. Aid or those who worked as Fhet [Lao word- "air field operator" and called the planes-- as soon as we arrived in Nam Pouy [province in northern Laos], within a year those people came [to America]. Those who worked with the U.S. Aid and worked with the Americans delivering aid and rations were considered to be like Americans so they got to come [to America] first. Soldiers, like us, had to find their own way. That's why we came later. After that, if you had no papers then you had to just wait to see if your children or relatives who were already in America could bring you over.[75]

While there was a formal categorized process, there were also "unwritten rules" which were done at the discretion of asylum case workers and immigration officers. These "rules" often gave precedence to married couples, young families, and young women.[76] The lack of a uniform system often gave political asylum case workers a sense of superiority as they were the ones who ultimately decided whether or not a refugee could be resettled to a third country. Ellen Bruno explained, that the decision of these refugees' lives was often in the hands of young "rough and tumble kind of guys" who were "unsavory characters" and "surely assholes."[77] She continued and explained that these officers were the ones who either approved or rejected these cases.

---

[74] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*, 74-90; and "Orderly Departure Program and U.S. Policy Regarding Vietnamese Boat People: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary," House of Representatives, One Hundred First Congress, First Session, June 28, 1989.

[75] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

[76] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*, 74-90.

[77] Ellen Bruno, September 23, 2022.

While Bruno did go on to help with family reunification of young girls, she did admit some complicity early in her career, albeit in a tenor with slight disgust, when she retorted, “We [the asylum case workers] all had more power than we should’ve had.”[78]

The refugee admission process involved comprehensive assessments of individuals’ personal histories, refugee status, security screenings, and vulnerability considerations. During the admission process, refugees were required to complete paperwork to facilitate the legal and administrative processes involved in their relocation.[79] Additionally, they may have been required to provide supporting documentation such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, medical records, and educational qualifications to verify their identity and background. Unfortunately, this requirement could be challenging as identifying paperwork was often lost or forgotten while fleeing persecution.[80] It was even more challenging, when a culture, like the Hmong, relied on oral records and typically did not keep physical identifying documents. As one North Carolina Hmong refugee, Xiong Lor, described, “back in Laos, there is no birth certificate. There is no documentations of when you was born, our parents, you just have to remember the time in the season."[81] Pang Vang, another Hmong refugee who permanently resettled in North Carolina, agreed, "A lot of Hmong refugees have a birthdate of January 1 and have a rough year of when they thought they were born."[82] He explained that case workers would often enter January 1 as the birth date because the Hmong did not know exactly when they were born. [83] In addition to not knowing exact birth dates, the Hmong did not have a uniformed written language which of course presented challenges when submitting information for travel documents. Xiong explained that the spelling of Hmong names depended on the immigration officer doing the interview. He said, "Looking back now…I can see why there's so many dialogs of spelling Xiong. Some spell it S-I-O-N-G, some spell its X-I-O-N-G, some S-O-N-G. So, I guess it's just whoever the person who's taking on the application because we have information to give them. They're just going off of what they think is right. …From that point on, that's how your name is going to be in the United States."[84]

---

[78] Ellen Bruno, September 23, 2022.

[79] Refugees were and still are required to provide paperwork for several reasons, including security, legal, and administrative purposes. With these documents, international governments complete several rounds of security screenings, confirm that individuals meet the legal definitions and criteria for refugee status, to allocate resources, to reunify family members, to provide international obligations and protection regarding the treatment of refugee. Countries that are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol have specific obligations. This documentation ensures that these obligations are met and that refugees receive the protection and rights they are entitled to under international law. For more information, please see “Refugee travel documents,” UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, accessed June 28, 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/complementary-pathways-admission-third-4#:~:text=UNHCR%20advocates%20for%20States%20to%20be%20issuing%20and,countries%20of%20asylum%20be%20easily%20renewed%20at%20embassies

[80] Raimo Vayrynen, “Funding Dilemmas in Refugee Assistance: Political Interests and Institutional Reforms in the UNHCR., *The International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001): 143-67. See also, UNHCR, *The State of the World’s Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, 1-5 and 13-15.

Once identification was proven and refugee status approved, Hmong refugees were provided with official documents such as a refugee travel document, which allowed them to travel internationally. Refugees also received a resettlement confirmation form, which confirmed their acceptance for resettlement to a specific country.[85] Maintaining this paperwork was critical for establishing their legal status in the U.S., ensuring their access to necessary services, and facilitating their integration into the resettlement country's local communities.[86]

---

[81] Xiong Lor, interview by Emmanuel Lee, July 20, 2018 in Hickory, North Carolina, interview and transcript, Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28280/rec/1

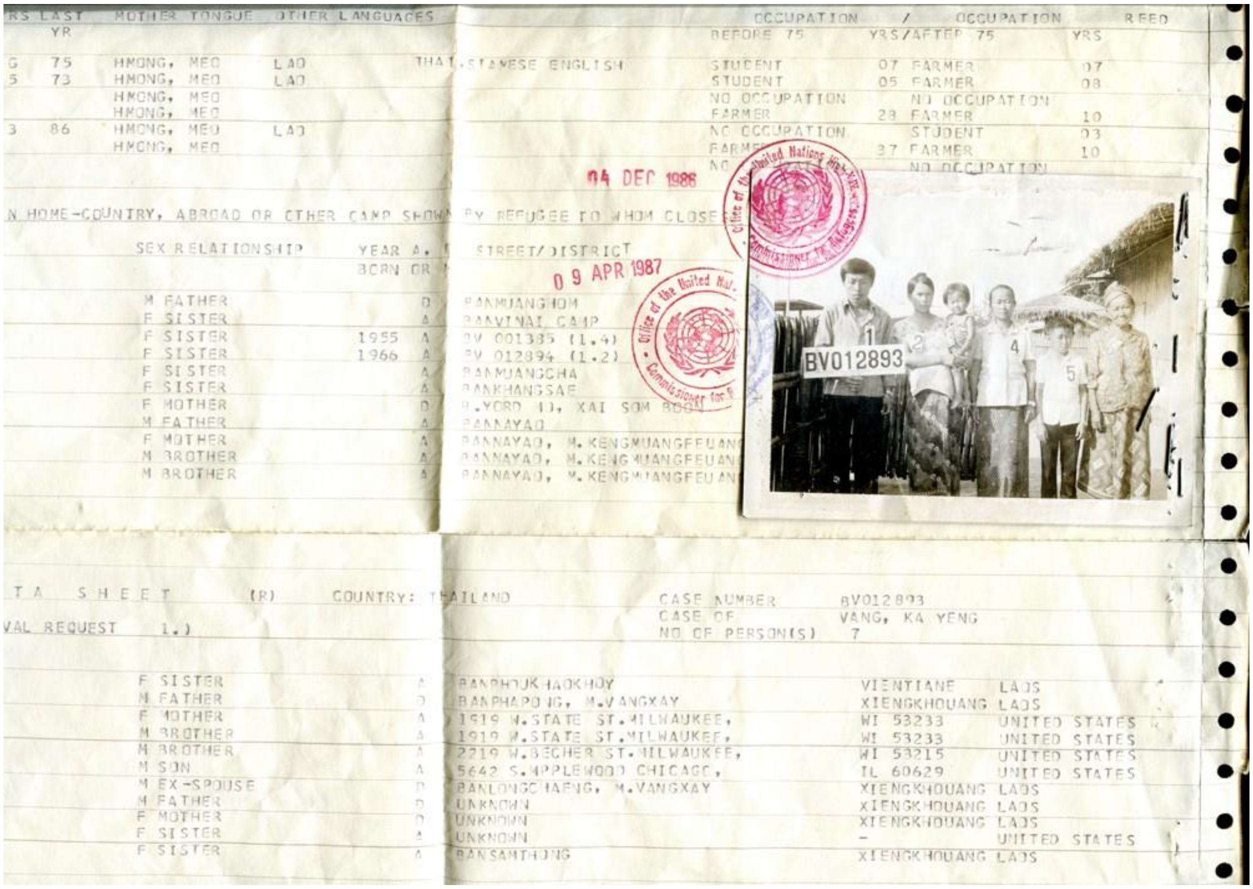
[82] Pang Vang, interviewed by author, October 31, 2023.

[83] Pang Vang, October 31, 2023.

[84] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[85] Raimo Vayrynen, "Funding Dilemmas in Refugee Assistance: Political Interests and Institutional Reforms in the UNHCR," 143-67. See also, UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, 1-5 and 13-15.

Figure 3. United Nations High Commission for Refugees paperwork belonging to a Hmong refugee, Ka Yeng Vang, contributed by his daughter Houa Yang. The paperwork includes the family's information and an image of them lined up in the following order from left to right and identified in relation to Ka Yeng Vang: (1) Ka Yeng Vang (primary applicant); (2) Mai Her (wife); (3) Choua Vang (daughter); Zoua Yang (step-mother); (4) Xoua Vang (brother); (6) Nhia Yang. Contributed by his daughter, Choua Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



BV012893
1
2
4
5

RS LAST		MOTHER TONGUE	OTHER LANGUAGES		OCCUPATION BEFORE 75	/ YRS/AFTER 75	OCCUPATION	REED YRS
	YR							
G	75	HMONG, MEO	LAO	THAI,SIAMESE ENGLISH	STUDENT	07	FARMER	07
5	73	HMONG, MEO	LAO		STUDENT	05	FARMER	08
		HMONG, MEO			NO OCCUPATION		NO OCCUPATION	
		HMONG, MEO			FARMER	28	FARMER	10
3	86	HMONG, MEO	LAO		NO OCCUPATION		STUDENT	03
		HMONG, MEO			FARMER	37	FARMER	10
					NO		NO OCCUPATION	

04 DEC 1986

N HOME-COUNTRY, ABROAD OR OTHER CAMP SHOWN BY REFUGEE TO WHOM CLOSE

09 APR 1987

SEX	RELATIONSHIP	YEAR BORN	A. OR	STREET/DISTRICT
M	FATHER		D	BANMUANGHOM
F	SISTER		A	BANVINAI CAMP
F	SISTER	1955	A	BV 001385 (1.4)
F	SISTER	1966	A	BV 012894 (1.2)
F	SISTER		A	BANMUANGCHA
F	SISTER		A	BANKHANGSAE
F	MOTHER		D	H.YORD 10, XAI SOM BOON
M	FATHER		A	BANNAYAO
F	MOTHER		A	BANNAYAO, M.KENGMUANGFEUAN
M	BROTHER		A	BANNAYAO, M.KENGMUANGFEUAN
M	BROTHER		A	BANNAYAO, M.KENGMUANGFEUAN

TA SHEET (R) COUNTRY: THAILAND

VAL REQUEST 1.)

CASE NUMBER BV012893
CASE OF VANG, KA YENG
NO OF PERSON(S) 7

F	SISTER	A	BANPHOUKHAOKHOY	VIENTIANE	LAOS
M	FATHER	D	BANPHAPONG, M.VANGXAY	XIENGKHOUANG	LAOS
F	MOTHER	A	1519 W.STATE ST.MILWAUKEE,	WI 53233	UNITED STATES
M	BROTHER	A	1919 W.STATE ST.MILWAUKEE,	WI 53233	UNITED STATES
M	BROTHER	A	2719 W.BECHER ST.MILWAUKEE,	WI 53215	UNITED STATES
M	SON	A	5642 S.MAPPLEWOOD CHICAGO,	IL 60629	UNITED STATES
M	EX-SPOUSE	D	BANLONGCHAENG, M.VANGXAY	XIENGKHOUANG	LAOS
M	FATHER	D	UNKNOWN	XIENGKHOUANG	LAOS
F	MOTHER	D	UNKNOWN	XIENGKHOUANG	LAOS
F	SISTER	A	UNKNOWN	-	UNITED STATES
F	SISTER	A	BANSAMTHONG	XIENGKHOUANG	LAOS

---

[86] Molly Fee, "Paper Integration: The Structural Constraints and Consequences of the US Refugee Resettlement Program," *Migration Studies* 7, no 4 (2019): 477-95. UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees, 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*, 1-5 and 13-15.

In addition to the Orderly Departure Program, United States passed the Refugee Act of 1980, the first U.S. law to address the migration of people of "special humanitarian concern" and to specifically address refugees as defined by the United Nations.[87] President Jimmy Carter signed the Refugee Act of 1980 in March of that year. The Refugee Act took effect in April, 1980, becoming the first comprehensive U.S. policy to address the admittance of refugees.[88]

Even though the U.S. passed the Refugee Act of 1980 which increased the quota of the number of refugees the U.S. admitted, the Thai government became gradually tired and exasperated with the lack of support from the international community as the humanitarian crisis burgeoned. By 1983, the Thai government implemented a "humane deterrence" program which made life in Ban Vinai more unfavorable while also turning away other refugees who were seeking asylum. A 1984 *New York Times* article reported that 130,000 refugees in Thailand awaited resettlement, with approximately fifty-thousand being Hmong. During this time, the U.S. was admitting approximately three thousand refugees from the Thailand camps every month with other refugees resettling in Australia, France, Canada, and several other nations. Unfortunately, the thousands of refugees being resettled every month was not enough and Thailand's economy was struggling, forcing the country to consider potentially dire solutions. Prasong Songsiri, an official from the Secretary General of Thailand's Office of the National Security Council, an office which monitored the country's borders and made recommendations to the government on various matters including refugee affairs, announced a census to be conducted on one of the refugees camps to determine the likelihood of the refugees currently living there to be permanently resettled to a third country.[89] The 1984 census report determined that many refugees would be unlikely to resettle. In 1985, Thailand closed the Ban Vinai camp and other refugee camps to new arrivals although some Hmong were still able to sneak in and find brief refuge.[90]

---

[87] Refugee Act of 1980, PL 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980). During the middle of the twentieth century, the United States experienced a shift of immigrant populations coming from European countries to Latin American, Asian, and some African countries. This shift was the result of several factors including: the implementation of federal laws such as the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 and the Refugee Act of 1980, and the global phenomenon of decolonization. In 1960, the immigrant population from Asia only represented about five percent of the total U.S. immigrant population. In 1970, the Asian immigrant population shared just under nine percent of the total immigrant population. By 1980, the number had doubled and immigrants from Asian countries represented eighteen percent. By 1990 and 2000, this number had stabilized as each decade saw roughly twenty-five to twenty-six percent of Asian immigrants representing the total U.S. immigrant population. "Regions of Birth for Immigrants in the United States, 1960-Present." *Migration Policy Institute*, (accessed April 20, 2023), https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#Diaspora

[88] Refugee Act of 1980, PL 96-212, 94 Stat. 102 (1980). The Refugee Act of 1980 was passed to supersede the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). The Refugee Act of 1980 defined the term "refugee" and outlined the U.S. policy on refugee admittance and resettlement. Using the definition of a refugee established by the United Nations, the Act defines a refugee as "any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality or, in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such a person last habituality resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." The U.S. has a long and often complicated history with policies related to immigrants and refugees. Legislation is important to examine in order to understand the federal government's position on immigration and refugee resettlement. Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014) is the leading scholar on immigration history. While adding the refugee component to the preference system in the INA of 1965 appeared to be a strong political and gracious position by the U.S. federal government, reducing the visa allocation to under 300,000 and prefacing skilled labor and legal U.S. residents and citizens arguably negated—or at the very least, tainted—the assistance the federal government was providing to all Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. "Regions of Birth for Immigrants in the United States, 1960-Present."

Neng Xiong was part of one of the last groups of Hmong refugees to find temporary refuge in Thailand before Ban Vinai closed. Neng tried to help as many Hmong escape as he could before it became more pressing for him to leave the jungles of Laos. Neng recalled, "…it was already '86 when we [the group of Hmong he hid with] decided we really couldn't stay any longer in the jungle so we fled…" He continued, "as soon as we got there [Ban Vinai] we didn't stay long…We were one of the very last groups before everyone was transported to Chiang-Kham [a district in the northeastern part of Phayao province in northern Thailand]."[91] Neng Xiong was fortunate that he was able to sneak into Ban Vinai. Although the Thai government initially agreed to not push away any refugees, by 1985, it became increasingly more common for people to be turned away.[92] This policy angered much of the international community, including human rights organizations, the UNHCR, and the United States. In an effort to appease the Thai government and to prevent any more refugees being pushed back, the United States agreed to double the quota of refugees the country was to receive from Laos, including the Hmong. By early 1988, the annual Laotian quota increased from four to eight thousand refugees.[93]

---

[89] Barbara Crossette, "130,000 Refugees in Thailand Wait to Go Abroad." *New York Times,* September 2, 1984.

[90] Larry Clinton Thompson, *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992,* 47-61.

[91] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018. Chiang-Kham is a district in the northeastern part of Phayao province in northern Thailand.

Even with the increased refugee quota, Thai authorities, after already closing some refugee camps, began taking even more drastic measures. The Thai government began deporting asylum seekers who were already in the camps and turning away others who hoped to find refuge. A 1987 *New York Times* article reported on a forced repatriation campaign at the Thai refugee camp, Ban Vinai. Armed troops and police entered Ban Vinai in search of "illegals," referring to exiles who entered the camp after its official closure in 1983. Since 1985, Thai authorities began screening Lao exiles to verify refugee status. The detained individuals, many who had lived at Ban Vinai for years, lacked food rations and housing. Estimates of unregistered residents varied, with Thai authorities suggesting around ten thousand, while other estimates ranged from three to six thousand.[94] The total population in the camp, consisting of Hmong and Laotians seeking asylum, was approximately forty-two thousand.[95] After the raid, refugees claimed that seventy-nine Laotians, including Hmong, were sent back to Lao security forces. Thai officials repatriated another ninety-seven refugees in the following days, forcing refugees to immediately return to Laos.[96] A UNHCR representative in Bangkok, Gerald Walzer, expressed deep concern about involuntary returns and appealed for assurances against further forced returns. He called for examining the refugee claims of those currently detained under established procedures. The article also interviewed a forty-nine-year-old Hmong refugee, identified as Mr. Yang, who told reporters that he would rather be killed than sent back to Laos because "that would be better."[97]

---

[92] Barbara Crossette, "130,000 Refugees in Thailand Wait to Go Abroad." New York Times, September 2, 1984. Larry Clinton Thompson, Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992, 47-61.

[93] W. Court Robinson, *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response,* 116-120.

[94] Barbara Crossette, "Thailand Pressing Ouster of Laotians," *New York Times*, March 19, 1987.

[95] Barbara Crossette, "Thailand Pressing Ouster of Laotians."

While some refugees tried to make it across the Thai-Lao border, other Hmong retreated deeper into the jungles until they were forced to surrender. Immediately following the fall of Vientiane, approximately 300,000 Hmong fled while thousands more retreated to the jungles.[98] Small bands of Hmong lived with their families and other soldiers for decades in the jungles "facing starvation and continued military pressure" until they eventually surrendered.[99] In 2006, the hunger became overwhelming for a group of approximately four-hundred Hmong who had been pushed deep into the jungles when they surrendered to Ban Ha village in Phoukout District in north-central Laos. After the surrender, which was mostly children, fifty Lao soldiers arrived to transport the Hmong to an army camp in the district capital.[100] Brittis Edman, a representative of the Fact Finding Commission, an organization that lobbies in the U.S. for recognition of the Hmong wartime service, expressed his concern when he shared what happened to the last group of Hmong who surrendered. According to Edman, "The last time a similar group emerged from hiding in the jungle, they were taken to an army camp and held there incommunicado for months in very harsh conditions, according to reliable information given to Amnesty International."[101] Edman and others waited with fear as they were unable to reach the group of four-hundred Hmong who had surrendered. He said, "We are hoping this will not happen again."[102] By the early 2000s, Amnesty International, a global human rights organization, alleged that the Lao government committed severe human rights violations against the Hmong, a claim the Lao government denied. [103]

---

[96] Barbara Crossette, "Thailand Pressing Ouster of Laotians."

[97] Barbara Crossette, "Thailand Pressing Ouster of Laotians."

[98] Stéphane Courtois and Mark Kramer, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression,* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 575.

[99] "405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos," *New York Times,* December 14, 2006.

[100] "405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos."

Although more than 100,000 Hmong refugees were resettled to the U.S., there were thousands more who sought asylum from Thailand and permanent resettlement in a third country who were ultimately denied.[104] The situation for many Hmong became desperate and led to suicide for some refugees. A 2005 *BBC* article reported on suicides and suicide attempts by Hmong refugees who were expelled from temporary shelters awaiting repartition to Laos.[105] According to the article, there were over six thousand ethnic Hmong refugees seeking safety in the Khao Kho district of Thailand, with approximately two thousand refugees claiming to have supported the CIA-backed Secret War in 1975.[106] The refugees were now homeless and forced to find refuge on the roadside in shelters made of bamboo and canvas. Local landowners were threatened to evict any refugees they may have been harboring or potentially face five years in prison and a steep fine of approximately fifty-thousand baht or roughly one thousand U.S. dollars.[107] In the subsequent years, the repatriation of Hmong asylum seekers intensified, with Thai soldiers, equipped with riot shields and clubs, forcibly removing over four thousand individuals from a holding center. They were subsequently repatriated to Laos, where they claimed to be at risk of retaliation from their government.[108] As Thai soldiers transported the Hmong back across the Mekong River, the U.S. urged the Thai government to halt its operations. In response, the Prime Minister of Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva, claimed that he has received assurances from the Laotian government that the Hmong will be well-received and "that these Hmong will have a better life."[109]

---

[101] "405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos."

[102]"405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos."

[103]"405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos."

[104] For complete data, please see the appendix.

[105] "Hmong refugees in Thailand protest against repatriation to Laos," *BBC Worldwide Limited*, July 6, 2005.

[106] "Hmong refugees in Thailand protest against repatriation to Laos."

[107] "Hmong refugees in Thailand protest against repatriation to Laos."

The largest wave of Southeast Asian refugees, including the Hmong, arrived to the United States in the 1980s, with a steady admittance of refugees in the following years. The increase in admitted refugees during the 1980s was primarily due to the 1980 Refugee Act which increased the quota of refugees from 17,400 to 50,000.[110] However, during the 1990s, the Thai government decided to permanently close refugee camps.[111] The closure of the camps resulted in refugees still waiting for resettlement to be displaced again. The Hmong who had not been resettled before the closure of Ban Vinai were relocated to other camps and refugee centers including Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple in Thailand.[112] Even with the resettlement of Hmong throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century, there were still a few hundred thousand who remained in camps. By the early 2000s, approximately 315,000 Hmong were displaced in Laos and several million continue to live in the jungles of China, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma.[113]

---

[108] "Hmong refugees in Thailand protest against repatriation to Laos."

[109] Seth Mydans, "Thailand: Hmong Sent Back to Laos," *New York Times*, December 29, 2009.

[110] The Refugee Act of 1980 also implemented procedures of emergency situations when the admission of refugees exceeds the 50,000 cap. Refugee Act of 1980, Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94, Stat. 102 (1980).

[111] Seth Mydans, "Thailand: Hmong Sent Back to Laos."

[112] Wat Tham Krobok was a Buddhist temple located in the Phra Phutthabat District of Saraburi Province, Thailand. Throughout the Secret War, the temple supported the Hmong and their resistance efforts against the Pathēt Lao. When Laos fell, Wat Tham Krobok agreed to host refugees on their grounds. The temple's drug rehabilitation program drew international attention as the Buddhist monks helped rehabilitate the Hmong who were addicted to opium and heroin. Through this program, the temple detox over one-hundred thousand Hmong by the end of 2015. In addition to using the Hmong as guerrilla military combatants during the Secret War, the U.S. government also used the Hmong to smuggle heroin and opium. Unfortunately, this led severe drug endemic that ravaged the population. Both Wat Tham Krobok's humanitarian efforts and the CIA's drug trafficking are interesting stories, but are not within the scope of this research. For more information on Wat Tham Krobok see: Ian Baird, "The Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province Thailand," in *Violent Buddhism: Buddhism and Militarism in Asia in the Twentieth Century,* Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke (eds), (London: Routledge, 2013).

As of 2019, the largest populations of the more than 100,000 foreign-born Hmong refugees resettled to the United State, predominately live in four states.[114] In Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota there are approximately 81,000 Hmong. Fresno and Sacramento, California have the next largest populations, roughly 35,000 and 27,000, respectively. Milwaukee, Wisconsin has a population of approximately 11,000 Hmong. Hickory, North Carolina is home to approximately 8,000 Hmong.[115]

Even though Neng Xiong, Chia Yang, Tong Xiong, and Bee Chong reemerged from life underground and hiding in the jungles, they still suffer from both physical pain and emotional trauma of having to leave behind their home and loved ones. Tong Xiong, the Hmong refugee who was abandoned by his family at fifteen sorrowfully expressed, "I was an orphan and a soldier…I'm grateful that I at least didn't die. I was injured as a soldier… I'm in pain everyday."[116] Even though his physical pain reminds him of his past, he is "so glad to be here today to be able to leave these memories for my children."[117]

The United States' approach to refugee policies has been largely reactive, with changes to policy often being made in response to humanitarian crises, such as with the Southeast Asian refugee crisis. This reactive approach has contributed to a lack of consistency and coherence in

---

[113] Jennifer Yau, "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States."

[114] Jennifer Yau, "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States."

[115] "Top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas by Hmong population, 2019," *Pew Research Center*, April 29, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-hmong-population-2019/. Jennifer Yau, "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States."

[116] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

[117] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

U.S. refugee policies and has created gaps in the refugee admission process, which ultimately gave U.S. case workers complete discretion in determining who can be resettled and when. As international debates ensued, refugees like Pai Lee and Neng Xiong waited in camps for years before they were granted refuge.[118] Refugees often experience significant trauma before and during their displacement, having fled war, conflict, persecution, and human rights violations. These physical and emotional scars can manifest in various ways, including anxiety, depression, other mental health conditions, and even guilt. The effects of trauma are still prevalent in Neng Xiong some fifty years later. Although he eventually made it to North Carolina, he still often thinks of Laos as the memory of his uncle and of those he left behind continues to haunt him. With some regret in his voice, he said, "... I am so sad for those who didn't make it...those lost in the chaos and couldn't make it to this country. Those left behind who are still hiding in the jungles, I hope you are well. Those of us who are in this country, we still remember you…We will tell your story for everyone to know."[119]

---

[118] Deborah Anker, and MH Posner, "The Forty Year Crisis: A Legislative History of the Refugee Act of 1980," *South Dakota Law Review* 19, no. 1 (1981): 9-89; Donald Kewin, "The Faltering U.S. Refugee Protection System: Legal and Policy Responses for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Others in Need of Protection," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1-33.

[119] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.

CHAPTER III: “I WOULD NEVER SEE MY HOMELAND AGAIN”: THE RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION OF HMONG REFUGEES

The very first king of the Hmong was a child who had remained in his mother’s womb for three years. Because he was such a special child, he grew up to be king. He then lived in a palace of pure gold. One day, the Hmong and their neighbors had a dispute over ownership of land.

The king ordered both parties to depart at nightfall and to return before sunrise. He decreed that each would be the owner of the land they had traveled over during the night. The party that did not return on time would have to remain at the place where the rising sun caught them traveling.

At daybreak, the Hmong found themselves on a high mountain, and since that time the Hmong have lived on mountains.[120]

–“Why the Hmong Live on Mountains”
Hmong Folk Story

Nhia Thong Yang, a Hmong refugee who left Laos and was resettled in the United States after the Hmong Secret War, managed to escape the immediate threat of death and persecution from the communist-backed Pathēt Lao forces, but now faced new uncertainties. The journey from initial arrival in the U.S. to finding permanent residency in North Carolina presented a different set of challenges as he and other Hmong refugees acclimated to a new language, customs, and society. One of the more difficult moments for Nhia was the fact that most Americans did not understand what it meant to be a refugee. He explained, “Most regular American citizens don’t know who we are. They might think we came to this country because we saw that this is a powerful country with great education and wealth but that’s not why we came."[121] Nhia further elaborated, "We are political refugees of war and that's why we had to come."[122]

---

[120] Norma Livo and Dia Cha, “Why the Hmong Live on Mountains” from *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam* (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991) 57.

Hmong refugees were forcibly displaced from their homeland, from the Laotian mountains they have lived in for centuries. Although some Hmong found temporary refuge in Thailand, and many others were eventually resettled to the United States, the journey of resettlement and integration in the U.S. was tumultuous. Hmong refugees had a unique resettlement and integration experience due cultural and agrarian backgrounds and due to their involvement with the U.S. during the Secret War in Laos. Due to their rural background, limited education, and English language proficiency, lack of a written language and written records, the Hmong faced significant challenges in a variety of scenarios including employment opportunities, education, and adapting to urban American culture, which may differ from the experiences of other immigrant groups. Additionally, the Hmong have strong community support networks, including extended family, mutual aid associations, and other ethnic organizations to help navigate the challenges of integration. These networks played a crucial role in providing social, emotional, and practical support to their community.

Upon arrival, some Hmong refugees, such as Pai Lee and Xiong Lor were reunited with family who had arrived to the U.S. a few years earlier. Others, such as Bee Chong Kao Vang, actively sought to reunify with their family members left behind in Laos. Over the decades, Hmong refugees often relocated to other areas in the U.S. where the Hmong population was growing including California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and North Carolina, the state with the fourth largest Hmong population. While California and Minnesota offered larger community networks, North Carolina also offered job opportunities in agricultural and textile manufacturing, industries that were more familiar to the Hmong due to their cultural backgrounds. North Carolina is also a leading state on the eastern seaboard in refugee resettlement and offered diverse communities. The presence of other immigrant and refugee communities helped foster a sense of belonging and acceptance. Additionally, the North Carolina environment helped some Hmong find peace, and helped to improve their mental health and overall well-being as the mountains reminded them of their homeland in Laos. While there has been some scholarship on the Hmong in California and Minnesota, there has been little written on the Hmong in North Carolina. [123]

---

[121] Nhia Thong Yang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en

[122] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

Refugee resettlement sponsorship in the United States operated through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) which coordinated with refugee resettlement agencies and local non-profits, including religious institutions, that collaborated with national counterparts and federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). These organizations provided essential support and programming to guide refugees through the resettlement and integration process which may have included support in finding housing, enrolling in language classes and job training courses, securing access to healthcare, and assisting with the bureaucratic processes in obtaining legal documentation and securing employment.[124] Historically, support was often guaranteed for thirty to ninety days after arrival to the U.S. and while many sponsors continued to provide support after the short timeframe, it was not required.[125] Once in the United States, few Hmong refugees stayed in the city they were initially placed and moved to be closer to family, for better weather, or for better job opportunities. Hmong refugees desperately tried to find work, which presented ongoing challenges again due to the lack of English proficiency. As a result, many Hmong refugees either worked in factories where understanding English was not a requirement or became independent farmers. Although integrating into American society was challenging, the Hmong value collectivism and supported their community by helping others find work, housing, interpretative services.

---

[123] Please see Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), Sucheng Chan, *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), and Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures.* Both Rutledge and Chang provide foundational works on refugee resettlement and integration in the U.S. Rutledge presents a comprehensive anthropological study, showcasing how cultural traits such as resilience and strong family values have enabled Vietnamese refugees to adapt to American society while preserving their traditional beliefs. Chang provides a comprehensive account of Cambodian refugees' journey from the Khmer Rouge regime to resettlement in the United States, highlighting their struggle for survival, self-determination, and economic stability amidst trauma, poverty, crime, and racial discrimination, drawing from multidisciplinary research and individual narratives. Fadiman provides a case study example of the struggles and Hmong refugee family in California experienced, specifically related to medical cultural differences.

---

[124] Jessica Darrow, "Working It Out in Practice: Tensions Embedded in the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program Resolved through Implementation," in *Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance*, edited by Adele Garnier, Liliana Lyra Jubilut, and Kristin Bergtora Sandvik, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018): 93-117. And David Haines, *Safe Haven?: A History of Refugees in America* (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010); 12-14. For more information on resettlement agencies, please see "Reception and Placement-United States Department of State." U.S. Department of State, February 15, 2023, https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/reception-and-placement/ and "Resettlement Agencies," The Administration for Children and Families, rev. February 28, 2023, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/resettlement-agencies. There are ten national resettlement agencies including: Bethany Christian Services, Church World Service, Episcopal Migration Ministries, Ethiopian Community Development, HIAS, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI). As of March 3, 2024, together, these ten national organizations operate approximately four hundred affiliate offices nationwide. As of 2023, Wyoming does not have a single agency. This has been the typical process of refugee resettlement since the passage of the Refugee Act of 1980. There is a current grassroots movement to revolutionize the refugee resettlement process which has contributed to new federal government-sponsored program called "Welcome Corps." This grassroots movement and new government program will be further discussed in the epilogue.

[125] "Charting a Course to Rebuild and Strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program," *Center for Migration Studies*, December 2020: 1-6. And Katharine Donato and Elizabeth Ferris, "Refugee Integration in Canada, Europe, and the United States: Perspectives from Research," *ANNALS, AAPSS* 690, July 2020: 11-22. In the 1990s, the U.S. policymakers pushed for a thirty-day sponsorship period to reduce the level of government assistance. However, most resettlement agencies stay with the ninety-day sponsorship period. Recent studies have concluded that this time-period in insufficient and does not result in less government assistance. For more information, please see, Yan Digilov and Yehuyda Sharim, "Refugee Realities: Between National Challenges and Local Responsibilities in Houston, Texas," *Rice Kinder: Institute for Urban Research* (Houston, Texas, 2018): 13-31, https://kinder.rice.edu/research/refugee-realities-between-national-challenges-and-local-responsibilities-houston-tx. Additionally, refugees are required to pay back their travel loans, meaning they arrive in debt. For more information, please see, Fabrice Robinet, "Welcome, Refugees. Now Pay Back Your Travel Loans." *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/nyregion/refugees-travel-loans.html

Bee Chong Kao Vang vividly recalled his arrival to the United States in June 1978.[126] He had connecting flights in both Alaska and Illinois before reaching his final destination in Mobile, Alabama. Unfortunately for Bee, his plane was late causing him to miss his connecting flight in Chicago. He did eventually make it to his destination, but missed his scheduled pick-up time with the resettlement agency. Bee somberly reflected, "So when I got to Mobile, Alabama, there was no one there."[127] Bee carried the phone number of the person who was to pick him up at the Alabama airport, but because of his missed connection, they left. Bee sat in the airport and "After a while everyone left, so I saw a person coming towards me so I gave...I had the phone number."[128] Bee knew a couple of English phrases so he handed the phone number to a person in the airport and asked, "Please call."[129] The person he handed the number to responded with, "Oh, you were late that's why [they] weren't able to get you."[130] The person was kind enough to call the number for Bee, but he had to wait another forty-five minutes alone in the airport before they arrived.[131] While Bee, and other Hmong refugees were permanently resettled in the U.S., the transition to U.S. customs, work culture, and language was challenging. Bee described his travel to the U.S. as "difficult" partly due to his lack of knowledge of U.S. culture more broadly, but also because he primarily only knew Laotian and French. He remembered, "It was so difficult when we first came to America. At that time, Hmong people didn't know what America was like or even where America was. When we were in school we only learned Laos and French so we didn't know any English."[132]

---

[126] Bee Chong Kao Vang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106799?ln=en.

[127] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[128] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[129] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[130] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[131] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

While resettlement agencies act as the case managers for a refugee, they also relied on local non-profits or religious institutions to sponsor and assist welcoming newcomers to their community. Xiong Lor, a Hmong refugee who was only four or five when he left Laos, recalled his family arriving in St. Paul, Minnesota "to meet our sponsor."[133] In the case of Xiong, a local church sponsored his family. Xiong remembered a gentleman who welcomed him and his family was part of the local church, although he could not recall which one. He did recall the man being friendly and that "he kind of show[ed] us around, kind of help[ed] us set up."[134] Xiong recalled that the man and other church members helped his family find "a home, placed my parents into education classes to kind of get familiar with Americans ways, helped them get [a] license and get a car and kind of just help[ed] get our lives started in the United States."[135] While Xiong seemed grateful for the initial support in finding housing, helping his parents enroll in language acquisition classes, and enrolling him and his siblings in school, Xiong still said it was a "tough transition for my whole family because my parents don't speak English at all. And of course, we [Xiong and his siblings] don't."[136] While he appreciated the support in finding housing, Xiong and his family did not realize the housing was a short-term rental, since many sponsors were not obligated to provide further assistance past the initial three-month period.[137] As such, Xiong's family "kind of moved around…[and] ended up in the housing project."[138] Xiong remembered living there for roughly a year before his family moved to North Carolina.[139]

---

[132] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992): 90-100.

[133] Xiong Lor, interview by Emmanuel Lee, July 20, 2018 in Hickory, North Carolina, interview and transcript, Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28280/rec/1

[134] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[135] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[136] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.The transition and integration for young Hmong children and first-generation Hmong Americans will be discussed further in the fourth chapter.

Often times families were separated during the resettlement admission process in part due to the tiered-category system which placed precedence on those with family ties already in the U.S., past employment with the U.S., or collaboration with U.S. programs. While these were the "formal categories," there were often "unwritten rules" which was done at the discretion of the case worker at the refugee camp and often prioritized married couples, young families, and women.[140] Although families were separated leaving Laos, many were reunified later once in the U.S., but it often took years.[141] In addition to sponsoring his immediate family, the church also supported Xiong's uncle, his dad's brother, who had already arrived in Minnesota.[142] Similar to Xiong's experience, Bee Chong Kao Vang was separated from his parents during the admission process.[143] As he waited for nearly four years to be reunified with his parents, Bee continued to mail money back to Laos and saved the remaining funds to eventually support his family's resettlement to the United States. Bee and his parents were reunited in 1982.[144]

---

[137] "Charting a Course to Rebuild and Strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program and "Refugee Integration in Canada, Europe, and the United States: Perspectives from Research, "11-22

[138] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[139] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[140] Jana K. Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, Cal.: Oakland University Press, 2020), 74-90. Ellen Bruno (activist and filmmaker), interviewed by author, September 23, 2022.

[141] For more information on family reunification, please see: Janet Dench, "Ending the Nightmare: Speeding up Refugee Family Reunification," *Canadian Issues* (Spring 2006): 53-56; "U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Access Categories," U.S. Department of State, accessed January 20, 2024, https://2017-2021.state.gov/refugee-admissions/u-s-refugee-admissions-program-access-categories/; "Family of Refugees and Asylees," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, accessed January 20, 2024, https://www.uscis.gov/family/family-of-refugees-and-asylees.

[142] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[143] Bee Chong Kao Vang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106799?ln=en. See also, "Charting a Course to Rebuild and Strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program," *Center for Migration Studies*, (December 2020): 1-6 and Katharine Donato and Elizabeth Ferris, "Refugee Integration in Canada, Europe, and the United States: Perspectives from Research, *ANNALS, AAPSS* 690, (July 2020): 11-22.

In 1987, Pai Lee—the Hmong refugee who was injured during the bombing of her village and was abandoned by husband—and her daughter, her younger sister, and her younger brother's family were reunited with her other sister in California who had "already fled to America while we were still in Laos" in 1975.[145] While the reunification with her family was joyful, the economic challenges quickly proved daunting. In order to support her daughter, Pai Lee thought the best solution was to get married to a person who could support her. She explained, "I was just really poor and…I just thought that the best way to support me and my child was to get married… because I didn't know how to drive, I didn't know how to speak English nor did I know how or where to get a job. And he seemed to be able to support himself, so I saw that I could build a future with him."[146] Pai met her second husband in the U.S. and "because he was looking for a wife and I looking for a husband, we decided to get married."[147]

Pai Lee and her second husband stayed in California for ten years and gave birth to five more children before moving to North Carolina in 1995 and having her youngest son.[148] Pai and her husband decided to move across the country for job opportunities. She explained, "in California we weren't able to get good jobs, because we weren't educated."[149] The Hmong community who was already in North Carolina encouraged her family to move. She said, "we heard from other [Hmong] people that, North Carolina there were places that were taking people, that even if they didn't have an education, it was okay. So that's why we moved to North Carolina, for better job opportunities."[150]

---

[144] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[145] Pai Lee interview by Emmanuel Lee, July 27, 2018 in Morganton, North Carolina, interview and transcript, Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28570/rec/3

[146] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[147] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[148] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[149] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

While secondary migration offered new opportunities and support networks, it also presented challenges for the state, such as loss of social and cultural connections or difficulties in accessing services in new locations. Managing secondary migration required coordination among federal and state governments, resettlement agencies, and communities to ensure the well-being and integration of individuals and families who choose to relocate. Unfortunately, this coordination among agencies was often limited.[151] The U.S. media and Congress knew about the potential issues of secondary migration that could arise for both refugees and state governments. Additionally, while the federal government granted resettlement agencies approximately thirty-five million dollars a year—roughly 560 dollars per refugee—to be resettled from overseas to the U.S., the government had been reluctant to provide additional funds to relocate refugees again within the U.S. after arrival.[152] Some U.S. officials were concerned that an internal resettlement program would result in "charges of using 'Big Brother' tactics in dictating where the refugees should live."[153] A State Department resettlement program officer, Douglas Hunter, explained, "Engineering where people go live is not something the government is good at."[154]

However, the increasing refugee populations in some states, such as Californian, began to strain the state's resources. Consequently, California state officials and congressmembers encouraged Southeast Asian refugees to move east. A *Los Angeles Times* article explained that due to over one-third of refugees entering the U.S. through California, government officials declared that the state's job market and capacity to offer social services was significantly impeded.[155] In order to alleviate the stresses on resources, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sought to relocate refugees to other regions of the U.S. with lower welfare dependency and greater job prospects.[156] A pilot program was implemented for secondary resettlement, called the Favorable Alternate Sites Project also known as the Planned Secondary Resettlement Program.[157] The project was developed in response to the over-resettlement of refugees in certain states, such as California, throughout the country. The primary objectives of the programs included reducing welfare dependency and increasing the self-sufficiency of refugees.[158] North Carolina and Georgia were prime candidates for the secondary relocation of refugees as they had higher job prospects in manufacturing and blue-collar work.[159] However, some North Carolina officials were concerned about the federal government's push to relocating refugees to the state and that North Carolina would feel the effects of refugee resettlement similar to California. In the *LA Times* article, North Carolina refugee coordinator expressed reservations and discouraged refugees from “get[ting] in the car and com[ing] on over here.”[160]

---

[150] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[151] Carol A. Mortland and Judy Ledgerwood, "Secondary Migration Among Southeast Asian Refugees in The United States," *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 16, no. 3-4 (1987): 293 and 317. See also, Eleanor Ott, "Get Up and Go: Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Migration in the USA," *UNHCR*, September 2011. https://www.unhcr.org/media/get-and-go-refugee-resettlement-and-secondary-migration-usa-eleanor-ott

[152] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs." *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1986, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-12-08-mn-1865-story.html

[153] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[154] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

---

[155] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[156] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[157] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[158] Deborah Kogan and Mary Vencill, "An Evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project: Final Report," sponsored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and Berkley Planning Association, (October 1984), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED268201.pdf and Richard C. Baiz, "Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) FY 1985 National Discretionary Activities Plan," received by All County Welfare Directors, Department of Social Services, March 6, 1985, Sacramento, California, https://www.cdss.ca.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acin85/I-25-85.pdf

[159] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs." Southeast Asian refugees with higher education levels and proficiency in English typically secured more prestigious "white-collar" positions, contrasting with those lacking education or English skills, who predominantly worked in manufacturing roles. Vietnamese refugees from the initial wave of Southeast refugees in the 1970s often possessed college degrees and entrepreneurial experience, yet faced significant obstacles as their qualifications frequently did not align with U.S. job requirements. This challenge was particularly daunting for professionals like surgeons unable to afford retraining, though some pursued technical degrees in fields like computer science or welding for economic stability and career advancement. For more information on how Vietnamese refugees integrated into the U.S. economy, please see, Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

A reason the federal government pushed for the secondary migration of refugees to states like North Carolina and Georgia were because of the job markets available. In the *LA Times* article, Linda Gordon, an employee of HHS and statistician on secondary migration, explained that the “immigrants who arrived just after the Vietnam War were Vietnamese, ‘much more a white-collar group,’ who had worked for Americans before and usually spoke English. Later, she said, the newcomers ‘were more likely to be blue-collar’ Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotians.”[161] Despite the concerns of oversaturating state resources, many federal, state, and private organization officials agreed that the “wealth of entry-level manufacturing jobs and adequate low-and moderate-income housing” coupled with “climates in those states that are not likely to shock the newcomer, who are accustomed to the hot, wet summers and mild winters of Southeast Asia” were advantages to resettling refugees to North Carolina.[162]

Some state officials also argued that the native-born population of North Carolina had similar life styles and culture which would better allow Hmong refugees and other newcomers to settle in the state. Raleigh Bailey, the director of refugee programs for Lutheran Family Services and future founder and director of the Center for New North Carolinians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, explained that Indochinese refugees, including the Hmong and Montagnard, fared well in the states because “they’re country folks, and North Carolinians are country folks, and they all get along."[163] Additionally, by the mid-1980s, there was already a large Hmong population present in North Carolina which allowed for Hmong refugees to still find community within the state.

---

[160] “Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs.”
[161] “Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs.”
[162] “Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs.”

While some federal and state officials supported the program, other officials remained pessimistic that the program would survive. Carol Leviton Wetterhahn, a consultant on resettlement issues for the State Department said, "Many things have to be tried but whenever everybody gets their act together and things go right, there's no money."[164] Wetterhahn's prediction was correct. While an evaluation of the program did prove it successful, it did not receive additional funding and did not extend past the pilot phase, ultimately ending the program.[165]

Struggles of refugee resettlement and integration continued into the 2000s. In an NPR 2004 report, Tom Scheck addressed how the goals and challenges of resettlement do not always align. In the conversation, he discussed with others how U.S. federal and state governments and communities were not equipped to handle an influx of Hmong refugees the U.S. experienced as the refugee camps overseas began to permanently close. One guest, Barry Shaffer, a director of an adult education program in Minnesota, which helped with language skill acquisition for Hmong refugees remarked, "Our programs are trying to open their doors as much as possible and are at kind of a facility crisis where there just isn't any space, period, to open any doors, let alone any new teachers."[166] Scheck noted that a handful of congressmembers were "seeking additional federal money to ease the concerns of states that are expecting the [Hmong] refugees," but even if approved, there was a sentiment among the larger American population about how "social services are already stretched too thin and don't think refugees should receive services."[167] Another NPR guest, Michael Hong, a Hmong refugee who worked for Ramsey County Human Services Department near St. Paul, Minnesota and who had recently visited refugee camps in Thailand, tried to combat the stereotype of Hmong refugees taking resources without contributing to the larger society. She reflected on her experience in the camps and said, "They [Hmong refugees] are very hard-working. They've had to work really hard to survive, and several of them came up to me and said, 'How am I going to survive in America? Are there jobs there? You know, will people want me to work?'"[168] She responded with, "If you want to work, you'll survive."[169]

---

[163] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[164] "Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs."

[165] Deborah Kogan and Mary Vencill, "An Evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project: Final Report," and Richard C. Baiz, "Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) FY 1985 National Discretionary Activities Plan."

[166] Renee Montagne, "Analysis: Several States Face Massive New Influx of Hmong Refugees," *Morning Edition, NPR* (July 21, 2004).

The Hmong are hardworking people who believe good work comes from "using your hands, however , not everyone in the U.S. believed the Hmong could find work and could adequately integrate into American society.[170] In 1987, Lo Vang, a Hmong refugee, law student, and intern for Minnesota Senator Rudy Boschwitz, sent a letter to Wyoming's U.S. Senator, Alan Simpson, after Simpson commented on Hmong refugees being a burden to the U.S. government and claiming that the demographic consisted of "people who don't assimilate well."[171] Lo also appealed to the moral and ethical obligation of the U.S. and that the "Hmong see the U.S. as an ally who made a profound promise to take them into its care when the war in Laos went wrong" and that "the Hmong expect the U.S. to keep that promise."[172] Not only were Hmong refugees promised safe haven in the United States, but—as Lo Vang argued—it was the moral responsibility of the United States government to provide refuge, assistance, and an avenue to becoming self-sufficient, productive American citizens who can fully integrate into the society.

---

[167] Renee Montagne, "Analysis: Several States Face Massive New Influx of Hmong Refugees." Other complaints the larger American public had about refugees receiving social services to help with integration include fears about job security, tax hikes, and general discrimination and prejudice towards newcomers.

[168] Renee Montagne, "Analysis: Several States Face Massive New Influx of Hmong Refugees."

[169] Renee Montagne, "Analysis: Several States Face Massive New Influx of Hmong Refugees."

[170] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[171] Lo Vang, "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang, a Hmong refugee from Laos," (July 29, 1987): 1, University of California at Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive.

Lo Vang further criticized the senator for claiming Southeast Asian refugees to be a burden on American society and its resources. He asserted that welfare was not a popular belief among the Hmong culture, but that many have found it difficult to move away from public assistance. He continued by listing six primary reasons Hmong refugees stayed on public assistance, but three in particular were especially significant. First, as Lo Vang argued, "State bureaucracies constitute another difficult barrier for refugees to be self-sufficient within a reasonable short period. They have a vested interest in keeping refugees and others on welfare."[173] He elaborated on this reason in his next point when he stated, "Although there are attempts to set up big projects to help the Hmong refugees, these projects are not meant for the refugees. They are directed and administered by people—though well-meaning—who don't know enough about the refugee experience or rely enough on advice from refugees."[174] To reinforce the broken welfare system, Lo continued and claimed that the "100 hour per month rule cut off families from public assistance—including medical care and housing subsidies—if a family member works over a hundred hours per month, regardless of what the income was and whether that was enough to sustain the family."[175]

---

[172] Lo Vang, "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang."
[173] Lo Vang, "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang."
[174] Lo Vang, "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang."
[175] Lo Vang, "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang."

While the Hmong demonstrate strong work ethic, the language barrier was a prominent and often debilitating challenge. Nhia Thong Yang, a Hmong soldier and refugee explained, "When I got to this country, because I didn't know the language, I just did any kind of work that didn't require an education. Whatever I was told to do, I just did it. But we Hmong, we are hardworking and we learn quickly. Whatever we are told to do, we can do it with little direction and that's how we survive."[176] Nhia worked in several factory jobs once he arrived in the U.S. including for a company that made computer parts including keyboards, motherboards, and recording equipment before finding another job where he worked to make medical equipment for hospitals.[177] Although Nhia took pride in his work, he was disheartened that the only jobs he and his fellow Hmong could secure were blue-collar type jobs. He said, "If it was a requirement that we had to speak the language then no one would ever hire us in this country because they only want professionals and educated people. It makes me sad but there's no other way and I have to live here so that's just how it is."[178]

Pai Lee had a similar experience. A friend of Pai helped her apply to jobs since she did not speak English. Pai said, "I would go with this friend that knew English and Hmong, and we would go together [to] the office and we will ask and apply."[179] Pai Lee was limited to jobs that allowed her to sit because of the "leg injury from Laos" she sustained when her village was bombed.[180] She explained the injury "caused me not to be able to stand up for too long a period of time. So I looked for jobs that allowed me to sit while I work."[181] When she moved to North

---

[176] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.
[177] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.
[178] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.
[179] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[180] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[181] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.

Carolina, Pai found a job “at a factory that made socks.”[182] She worked at the sock factory for a year before her “hand started hurting” and she found another job “at an assembly line creating power sockets for houses.”[183] She worked at the assembly line job for “six years—seven years” with other Hmong refugees before they “laid us off because they moved the factory to Mexico.”[184] By then, Pai was close to retirement age. She had saved enough money and received government benefits that she did not have to worry about finding another job. She explained, “Because of my age and my illness, I was able to get money from the government—monthly payments to help me out with the cost of living.”[185] After retiring, Pai spent most of her time in the garden. [186]

Yer Lee, the daughter of Hmong refugees, recalled how her family also moved from Connecticut to North Carolina for better employment. She recounted her mother’s experience and how a Methodist Church helped her mother and uncle when they first arrived to the U.S.[187] Although the church did aid her family, she recounted the frustration her uncle experienced with finding employment. She explained that he was a school principal in Laos, but unfortunately his credentials did not transfer over to the U.S. education system. In combination with needing a steady income to afford housing, food, and other basic necessities, and his lack of knowledge with the English language, her uncle was forced to find employment in various manufacturing industries as a blue-collar worker. Growing tired of factory work, her uncle decided to pursue a more entrepreneurial route, eventually deciding to move down to North Carolina to become an egg farmer.[188] In addition to the lack of employment, the Connecticut winters and smaller Hmong community grew dark and lonely for Yer's parents and siblings. She elaborated and added that the Hmong have always lived in the mountains and that the mountains in North Carolina closely resembled those in Laos. In 1989 her family followed her uncle and migrated to North Carolina, eventually buying a house near Hickory, which remains the family's primary residence.[189]

---

[182] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[183] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[184] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[185] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[186] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[187] Yer provides her phonetical pronunciation as DwHa in email communication to the author August 4, 2022. For privacy reasons, Yer asked that names of her family be omitted.

Like Yer's family, Xiong Lor's father quickly grew tired of the snow in Minnesota and left for Morganton, North Carolina. Xiong, in a joking manner explained that his dad "just didn't like the cold. He didn't like get[ting] up every morning, boiling up a hot pot of water and trying to get the ice off the keyhole to the door so he could unlock the car. He was tired of scraping snow. It was just too cold. You know, coming from Laos where it was a mild tropical country to totally 10 degrees, minus 10 degrees below zero, it's a big adjustment."[190] In addition to the frigid midwestern winters, Xiong said his father did not care for the urbanism of Minneapolis. Xiong explained that his dad "didn't adjust to it well. He didn't like a big city because they're farmers who liked open spaces. So, we had some relatives that moved down here [to North Carolina] because they found jobs down here and they moved down here and never look back."[191]

Similar to Yer's and Xiong's family, Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, a Hmong married couple also decided to relocate to North Carolina, but more out of necessity in finding better employment and a lower cost of living. Chia and Tong first landed in Yuba City, California in 1992 before moving to North Carolina in 1997. Chia explained that part of the reason they moved from California to North Carolina was because of the employment opportunities. She stated that they did not really have an education, but that they were told North Carolina had jobs that did not require a diploma.[192] Even though Chia and Tong did not have a family connection to North Carolina, they did know that there was growing population of Hmong. Chia and Tong were able to find a community and family within a local church, Hmong Alliance Church led by Pastor Nhia Vang, a connection they believed was crucial to their integration.[193]

---

[188] Yer Lee, interviewed by author, May 9, 2023.

[189] Yer Lee, May 9, 2023. Secondary migration refers to the movement of already resettled individuals or families to a different city or state within the country.[189] A myriad of factors drive secondary migration including, employment opportunities, family reunification, social networks, or the search for a more suitable environment. Secondary migration can be voluntary, as individuals seek better prospects or connections, or it can be involuntary, resulting from challenges or difficulties faced in the initial resettlement area.

[190] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[191] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

Tou and Chue Lee also moved to North Carolina for better employment opportunities and entrepreneurship. The Lees found a stable income in work they knew: farming. The Hmong were an agrarian culture who learned how to tend to the land when they were young. Agriculture was an inherit characteristic of the Hmong culture whether that was tending to a small garden or cultivating acres of farmland. As one Hmong refugee, Chaoya Yang explained, "our parents always were growing stuff."[194] Farming was the Tou's family livelihood in Laos and a tradition he sought to continue upon arriving in the U.S.[195] The Lees were able to purchase land near Marion, North Carolina and have since become successful farm owners of Lee's One Fortune Farm. The Lees grow a variety of native Asian crops, including several varieties of rice, water spinach, and yardlong beans, to sell at the local Asheville farmers' market.[196] Tou recalled learning Hmong agriculture practices through his parents before Laos was lost to the communist regime, Pathēt Lao. Tou was unfortunately the sole survivor of his immediate family, but he hoped to preserve the memory of his family by using the farming techniques his father taught him.[197]

---

[192] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, interview by Touger Vang, February 18, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106794?ln=en

[193] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

[194] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty," *The Tennessean*, September 30, 2021, https://www.tennessean.com/in-depth/news/american-south/2021/09/30/lees-one-fortune-farm-nc-hmong-refugees-grow-rice-food/5712965001/

[195] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty."

Pang Vang, a Hmong refugee who was a young teenager when he first arrived to the United States had a similar migration path to North Carolina. Originally resettled to Alamba, his family moved to the Midwest to be closer to relatives and for his father and eldest brother to attend school in Michigan. Pang and his family only lived in Mobile, Alabama for about four months before they moved to Michigan. When asked why his family moved to the Midwest, he plainly stated that his father and older brother "wanted to be educated" and "didn't want to work in a shipyard."[198] After a few years in Michigan, his family moved again, permanently, to Troy, North Carolina. For Pang and his family, the initial reason for moving to Troy was because of McRae Industries, a footwear and textile company which held a large contract with the U.S. military to produce boots and uniforms for American soldiers.[199] A contract the company received in 1966, during the height of the conflicts in Southeast Asia.[200] Pang's entire extended family and other Hmong refugees, eventually moved down to Troy to work at the company.

---

[196] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty."

[197] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming," My Home, NC on PBS NC, May 2, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOZOBjCgMEY. Since initially arriving in the U.S., the Hmong bamboo industry in North Carolina has flourished in recent years, showcasing the community's rich cultural heritage and entrepreneurial spirit. Drawing upon their traditional knowledge and craftsmanship, Hmong artisans have established a thriving bamboo industry, producing a wide range of exquisite handmade products. From intricately woven baskets and decorative pieces to furniture and even musical instruments, the Hmong artisans demonstrate remarkable skill and attention to detail. The industry has not only provided economic opportunities for the Hmong community but has also become a source of pride, as it allows them to preserve and share their cultural traditions with the broader society in North Carolina. Through their dedication and craftsmanship, the Hmong bamboo industry has become a vibrant part of the state's cultural tapestry, attracting both locals and visitors alike who appreciate the beauty and artistry of their handcrafted bamboo creations. Interview with Yer Lee, May 9, 2023 and Luci Weldon, "Bamboo Grows in Warrenton," *The Warren Record*, July 15, 2020, https://www.warrenrecord.com/news/article_c142920a-c698-11ea-b423-23308cc6b430.html.

[198] Pang Vang interviewed by author, November 9, 2023.

[199] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

When Pang and his family learned about employment availability at McRae Industries, they encouraged extended relatives, and Hmong from other clans to join. The town quickly grew with Hmong refugees. The community joined together and purchased plots of land across Montgomery County, creating small Hmong villages which consisted of several mobile homes. Pang recalled fond memories of stringing up a volleyball net between two trees were he, his cousins, and other Hmong children and young adults would come and play.[201] Over the years, the Hmong outgrew the small homes, and purchased larger plots of land where they built several, small single-family homes for his father, aunts, and uncles.[202]

Eventually, Pang and his family saved enough money and secured a loan for twenty-five thousand dollars to purchase land for a chicken farm. Pang explained that the Hmong believed in entrepreneurship and "using your hands" so his father went to the local bank and was successfully able to secure a loan, with the help of extended family members who contributed to the down payment.[203] Pang's dad started the farm with two barns that housed roughly ten thousand chickens each. The family has since expanded and now own eight barns and nearly a hundred thousand chickens. Pang's oldest brother continued the family business after his father's passing.[204]

---

[200] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023 and McRaee Industries, https://www.mcraeindustries.com/

[201] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023. The mobile homes still stand today and are now occupied by Laotian refugees.

[202] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[203] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[204] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

Instead of following the more common U.S. agricultural practice of monoculture farming which only cultivates a single crop on a large area of land, the Lees practice polyculture farming, a more traditional Asian agricultural practice which cultivates multiple crops in the same area. Over the years, the Lees have expanded to keep up with the demands of Asian varieties of produce while continuing to diversify their crops and grow foods that were in demand. During the late 1990s and early 2000s when more refugees originating from Africa began arriving to North Carolina, the Lees began growing African crops next to their Asian varieties while also growing produce more familiar to native-born Americans. In one field they grew heirloom peaches, sweet corn, yardlong beans, sweet potatoes, and cassava plants all next to each other.[205] While Tou and Chue Lee were the face of Lee's One Fortune Farm, they were not the only two who cultivated the land. As Tou explained, it was a collective effort from the entire family who worked together. He elaborated to say that without the collective labor from the Hmong community, there would be no profit.[206]

Pang Vang has also found an economic opportunity with growing African variations of crops, although not on the same scale as the Lees. Like the Lees, Pang recalled being at a local farmers' market one day helping some family members when he met and talked with some African refugees who recently arrived to North Carolina and were wanting familiar produce. Noting this new demand, Pang began researching African varieties of crops to start growing on his small acreage and selling at the local farmers market on the weekends.[207]

---

[205] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty."

[206] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty."

[207] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

In addition to struggling with finding stable work, housing, and learning English, some Hmong experienced racism, making the transition to living in the U.S. even more challenging. Pai Lee recounted personal experiences of racism, including “people throwing rocks at my house breaking windows, or like throwing eggs at my house” and her “own children… they’ve come in contact with racism with other students being…verbally ugly to them...”[208] When asked about how the racist encounters made her feel, Pai Lee responded with “Of course I was mad…I’ve been mad, I’ve been angry and sad about these things because it’s just kind of like why do they have so much anger and hate for us people, for you know, just being a different nationality. Even though we haven’t done anything to them, I just don’t understand…But it is what it is.”[209] Pang Vang also admitted he and his family experienced racism, but refused to elaborate. He plainly stated, “At least in the south they’re racist to your face instead of behind your back like in the Midwest.”[210]

Although the transition to the U.S. was daunting, the Hmong community demonstrated their collective values and provided support to each other, both in unfortunate and fortunate circumstances. Eventually, leaders within the Hmong community began establishing culture centers, and mutual aid associations to help other Hmong refugees. These cultural centers and mutual aid associations addressed common challenges and provided assistance to the Hmong community, without relying on formal institutions or government services. These services included language assistance, job training, healthcare access, legal support, and cultural preservation. In addition to providing additional support, mutual aid associations created a sense of belonging, solidarity, and collective empowerment within the Hmong community.[211]

---

[208] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[209] Pai Lee, July 27, 2018.
[210] Pang Vang, interviewed by author, November 9, 2023.

After initially resettling in Mobile, Alabama, Bee and his family moved to La Crosse, Wisconsin to be closer to extended relatives and other Hmong refugees.[212] Bee became involved with the Hmong Mutual Aid Association in La Crosse during the 1980s where he eventually served as a board member. Unhappy with the weather and scenery in Wisconsin, Bee and his family decided to relocate again and finally found permanent settlement in North Carolina where he continued to serve the Hmong community.[213] In North Carolina, Bee sat on the establishing committee of the multicultural community center, the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej. Bee defined his role in the development of the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej organization and the center's purpose.[214] He remarked that "even though we [the Hmong] are displaced from our home country we still want the Hmong to leave a legacy and history behind, along with a plot of land for the future generations... So we bought the land [Hmong Culture Park in Newton, North Carolina] that we had planned. Since 1994 to 1995, I've been a part of the organization, Hmong Southeast Puavpheej."[215] He elaborated and explained that he hoped the next generation of Hmong Americans will continue to "strive to be better" and to show the world what it means to be Hmong, to be proud of their heritage, and to continue to support future generations.[216] After Bee left his position with the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej, the organization recognized him for his service and dedication to the Hmong community with an award he proudly displayed.[217] The Hmong Southeast Puavpheej is still active today and continues to host annual cultural events like the Hmong New Year celebration, hold programming events such as an arts and crafts fair, and offer scholarships to Hmong Americans to attend college.[218]

---

[211] Paul Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 38-40. Mutual Aid Associations are also sometimes referred to as Mutual Assistance Associations.

[212] As mentioned in a previous chapter, Milwaukee, Wisconsin is a top five city for Hmong refugees. A table of the top five states with the largest Hmong population can be found in the appendix.

[213] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[214] There are a few definitions for puav pheej, but it is generally used to mean "award, medal, or deed." The Hmong Southeast Puavpheej (HSP) is a non-profit organization that operates out of North Carolina, but represent the Hmong communities of the Southeast including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. Its mission is to preserve Hmong culture heritage and tradition. Each year HSP hosts the Hmong New Year. The location rotates between the four states. The first Hmong New Year was celebrated in 1992 at Albemarle High School in North Carolina. To read more about the mission and history of the HSP, please visit: https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/about/

[215] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

Although the Hmong are a tight-knit community, where the success of one individual is viewed as the success of all, the culture was still heavily patriarchal, where men held the primary authority and decision-making power within the community. Hmong men were typically responsible for providing for and protecting their families, and their roles often involved working in agriculture or other income-generating activities. Conversely, Hmong women were expected to prioritize their domestic duties, such as taking care of the household and raising children.[219] However, upon arriving in the United States, some Hmong families required both parents to work while still upholding domestic duties.

Despite these traditional gender roles, Hmong society was not entirely devoid of female agency. Women possessed influence within their households and "control[ed] the cultural things, the traditional things, like when certain ceremonies should happen."[220] Women could also initiate a divorce if they were unhappy in a marriage and return to their natal home. Although divorce was rare, it did happen.[221] Unfortunately for Pai Lee who divorced her first husband in Thailand after he left her and their young child in the remains of their village after a bombing, Pai Lee found herself facing a divorce with her second husband due to neglect and abuse. She explained, "when I divorced my husband, it was because he didn't care for me anymore because I was getting older, I was getting sicker…and he just didn't want to take care of me anymore. And he was just yelling at me. We were just having constant arguments, so I figured it was just best if we got a divorce."[222] Fortunately, she found support with her sister during the proceedings of her second divorce.[223] In recent years, particularly within North Carolina, there has been an increase in recognition and promotion of gender equality, with efforts to empower Hmong women and challenge the gender norms of Hmong culture, including the establishment of a new non-profit organization, the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association. Second generation Hmong American women are gently challenging the dynamics of gender in Hmong culture to resemble feminism more reflective of western culture, but it could not have been done without the leadership of Hmong women like Kay Ying Lo.[224]

---

[216] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[217] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[218] "Hmong Southeast Puavpheej," https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/

[219] Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang, "Hmong Women, Family Assets, and Community Cultural Wealth," in *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, edited by Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016): 120-122.

[220] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023. The cultural influence of Hmong women will be touched on more in the third chapter.

Kay Ying Lo, a Hmong refugee found her way to North Carolina in 1995 after initially resettling in Syracuse, New York in 1979.[225] She was young when she and her family were first resettled in the United States, but she recalled Catholic churches sponsoring her family in New

---

[221] Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul: Gender and the Cycle of Life in a Hmong Village,* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2003): 169-170.

[222] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[223] Pai Lee, August 2, 2018.

[224] In the last year, a group of women have founded the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association to empower young Hmong girls to live a happy and fulfilling life. The organization recently received its 501(c)(3) status. This organization will be further discussed in the fourth chapter and epilogue. To learn more about the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association, please visit: https://nc-hwa.org/. The Hmong Southeast Puypheej also recently elected its first female president in 2022. To learn more about the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej, please visit: https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/.

[225] Kay Ying Lo, interview by Touger Vang, February 24, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106795?ln=en

York when they first arrived. In the 1980s, Kay and her husband moved to Wisconsin for a brief period of time before relocating to North Carolina to be closer to family. Kay and her husband were fortunate enough to have relatives with extra land who were willing to sell to them. After purchasing a piece of his relative's land, they bought a mobile home before eventually purchasing a house in Newton, North Carolina.

Kay was a dedicated mother, wife, and daughter-in-law who took her responsibilities seriously. She briefly noted that she and her friends had fantasized about the "American Dream" when they were younger and pretended to be living in the dorm rooms, eating pizza, but she knew that would not be a possibility and understood her obligations to her family and the Hmong community. However, it did appear that Kay found a version of the "American Dream" where she was able to use her education and position within the community to become a new type of leader who stepped forward as a cultural intermediary, bridging the gap between the Hmong and American counterparts.[226] Although she was not able to attend college, Kay was still well-educated and fluent in English. She decided to apply for work as an interpreter and bilingual specialist for the Catawba County Schools. Although her husband supported her work as an interpreter, she explained that she had to precariously balance her personal and professional life. It was important for her husband to remain the voice of the household within the Hmong community, but Kay was the voice of the Hmong in American society. She explained:

---

[226] Julie Keown-Bomar and Ka Vang, "Hmong Women, Family Assets, and Community Cultural Wealth," 120-122 and Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong in Minnesota*, 56.

> I always had to balance myself to be very reserved when I'm in the Hmong community and let my husband have the bigger voice. Where, in the American community, I worked as a bilingual interpreter and bilingual specialist, I was the voice of my community. So I had to balance this constantly and it was a battle at many places and many times because I knew exactly what was going on in Catawba County and my smaller side, the Hmong community knew nothing of what was going on in the community. It was like two worlds in one location, with one mind, one body.[227]

Although Kay struggled with this balance, she knew that her contributions to her community were important. While she never held an official position with a Hmong organization or within her community, she noted how she was often the voice at the events the Hmong community would host. She professed, "I have also always been involved with the Hmong community at large, whether it's at the New Year event, which is sponsored by an organization called Hmong Southeast Puavpheej. I've never held a position to be recognized as a 'position' but I have always been the voice for the event…"[228]

Unfortunately, Kay lost her husband in the early 2000s. Regardless, she persisted for the sake of her family. Although she dearly missed her husband, she exuberantly proclaimed her pride in being a Hmong woman when she stated:

> My proudest moment is being a Hmong woman. I'm a woman in the Hmong community whose husband has passed away for fourteen or fifteen years now and it's been very hard. I'm one of the first women to pioneer being a single mom with five kids in the Hmong community, trying to gain acceptance of who you are. As Hmong, it's tradition that you must have a husband in order to have a family, you must have a husband in order to be respected, you must have a husband if you want to do anything. If I had a husband, yeah he would be right there but I don't, so I had to be strong and live confidently.[229]

Even though Kay lost her husband, she was able to raise five children independently, an accomplishment that makes her deeply proud. She celebrated her success as a single mother, in part to respecting her tradition and culture. Although Kay did not hold an official position within the Hmong community, she knew how to make herself heard and valued. She acknowledged that being a Hmong woman was a delicate position and that “to be able to be loud and powerful in the Hmong community… You have to be a righteous woman… Fifty, sixty, or one hundred years from now, I want my daughters to know that no matter how much ambition, ability, or knowledge you have, you must respect others.”[230]

---

[227] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[228] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[229] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

Figure 4. Photograph of Kay Ying Lo and her two young daughters in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Christine (younger child) and Frances (older child). Contributed by her daughter Christine. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.

---

[230] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

Chia Yang, Tong Xiong, and Bee Chong echoed Kay's pride in the Hmong community and their accomplishments over the last fifty years. They all attributed their success to the strong Hmong community and the support they gave each other to integrate into American society while maintaining their cultural identity. Although Chia regretted that she could not help her children as much as she would have liked when they were growing up, she thanked the Hmong community for remaining strong and helping her and her family integrate as best they could during their initial resettlement. She urged and hoped the future Hmong generations would remember the importance of community to ensure the overall success of future Hmong generations. She remarked, "I don't just want this for my own children but for all the Hmong people. We shouldn't think that your last name is Vang and mine is Xiong and let that separate us. Your accomplishments are mine and mine are yours. We should help each other. Surnames should only help us trace our families but we are all Hmong."[231] Bee shared a similar pride in his cultural background and the connectedness of the Hmong community. He declared, "The thing I am happiest and most proud of is that I was born Hmong. If we Hmong know how to love and help one another then we will prosper."[232]

Although the Hmong were forced to leave their Laotian homeland in the fear of persecution and death, many Hmong eventually found their way back to the mountains where their folklore says they belong. While many Hmong are proud of where they are now, it is not without remembering all of the sacrifices family and friends made for them to escape. Bee Chong expressed a feeling of immense guilt and remorse for leaving beloved family members and his homeland behind. As he stated, "…when I was coming to America, I was so sad. Of course I was glad I was still alive and had survived but I was still sad…I thought I would never see my people again, I would never see my homeland again, I didn't know what would happen to me. I felt devastated."[233] While Neng Xiong shared Bee's sentiment he also expressed gratitude to those who gave their lives for their families to flee safely from Laos when he boasted, "What I am happiest about is that there were leaders [such as Hmong General Vang Pao] who made the way and many of them gave their lives to make it possible for our families and the younger generation to be here in a free country. The second thing I am happiest about is that I was able to bring my family and have a life here."[234]

---

[231] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.
[232] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

Upon arrival in the U.S., Hmong refugees like Pai Lee, Xiong Lor, and Bee Chong Kao Vang faced the task of building new lives. Many chose to relocate from their initially assigned cities to be closer to family, for warmer weather, or for better job prospects. However, challenges persisted for the Hmong, with language barriers posing an ongoing obstacle. Despite the hurdles, the Hmong community, driven by a strong sense of collectivism, supported one another. While Laos will be remembered as home for many Hmong refugees, some seem to have found a moment of peace and acceptance in the North Carolina mountains. As Tou Lee shared, "[The Hmong] reminisce of how life use to be. They look at these [the Appalachian] mountains and that's what it was like in the old homeland that the Hmong community lived. We're considered the mountain people of Laos. And so, when the Hmong people came here [to North Carolina], it feels like home."[235]

---

[233] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

[234] Neng Xiong, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106800

[235] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

CHAPTER IV: "I REGRET THAT WE CAN'T RELAY ALL OUR PEOPLE'S HISTORIES":

HISTORICAL MEMORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE HMONG

> *A very long time ago, the whole universe turned upside down. The earth tipped up, and the sky rolled over, and the whole world was flooded with water. All living things were killed, except one brother and his sister who had ran and taken refuge in an unusually large wooden and funeral drum. The brother and sister married each other and lived together as husband and wife. Later, they gave birth to a child. This child was like a round smooth stone. They cut the round egg-like child into little pieces. Then they threw the pieces in all directions. Two pieces fell on the goat house and these became the clan Lee. Two pieces fell in the pig pin became the clan Moua. Two pieces that landed in the garden turned into the clans Vang and Yang. This is how they founded all the Hmong clans.*[236]
>
> – "How the Hmong Clans Got Their Names"
> Hmong Folk Story

Nhia Thong Yang was a Hmong soldier who fought in the Secret War from 1963 to 1968. He fought in the last battle at Long Tieng before Laos fell to the communist-backed Pathēt Lao. Nhia was resettled to Virginia in 1978 with his wife and six children. He and his family moved across the country a few times before permanently settling in North Carolina in 1990. He is now retired and enjoys time with his grandchildren. Nhia is proud of the life his family has built; however, he expressed concern about how his children and grandchildren seem to be distancing themselves from their Hmong background and culture. He reflected, "I want our Hmong people to remember their culture...when you are asked what your culture is, you can't just answer that you're American…No. I am Hmong."[237]

---

[236] Pa Chou Yang, Se Yang, and Charles Johnson. *Myths, Legends and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos: Dab Neeg Hmoob*. 2nd edition (St. Paul, Minnesota: Linguistics Department, Macalester University, 1992) 115-118.

[237] Nhia Thong Yang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en

When the Hmong were forced to leave their homes and families, they faced significant emotional and psychological distress. Engaging in activities that celebrate and preserve their cultural heritage have helped some Hmong refugees mitigate these challenges by fostering a connection to their roots and a sense of continuity. Material artifacts are often overlooked as a source material in refugee history and is a point of critique among scholars. Material culture provides tangible evidence of refugee experiences in displacement. Examining artifacts of a culture that did not have a written record until the 1950s is especially significant as it provides a deeper understanding to customs, spirituality, and cultural celebrations. Centering Hmong voices through artifacts and cultural practices, emphasizes their agency in the face of adversity as they work to craft their own spheres of existence amidst displacement. Additionally, scholars often critique the lack of women voices in refugee history. However, the Hmong offer a unique perspective and more nuanced discussion as women are often viewed as the individuals who are responsible for maintaining cultural practices and customs. It was often Hmong women who taught their daughters to sew and embroider while also orally passing down folklore and legends. By amplifying marginalized voices and exploring the materiality of refugee experiences, scholars can offer a more comprehensive understanding of refugee histories and the diverse ways in which refugees navigate displacement and cultural preservation.[238]

Within Hmong culture, there are eighteen clans. Traditionally each clan correlated with a family name and represented a distinct cultural aspect of the Hmong identity. From the Chang clan, renowned for their leadership and shamanic traditions, to the Chao clan, historically associated with protection and warriorship, the clans offered a diverse range of roles and responsibilities within Hmong society. The Cheng clan's mastery of blacksmithing, the Hang clan's exquisite weaving, and the Her clan's musical talents contribute to the rich artistic heritage of the Hmong people. Meanwhile, the Kha clan's knowledge of hunting, the Lor clan's expertise in storytelling, and the Moua clan's healing abilities demonstrate the Hmong's deep connection to nature, history, and well-being. Together, these clans represented the intricacies of Hmong culture, reflecting a harmonious balance between tradition, craftsmanship, spirituality, and communal living. Since the Secret War and forced displacement, some of the more specific customs are not practiced as regularly. However, the Hmong continue to pride themselves on their craftsmanship and storytelling, two important practices of their cultural identity. [239]

---

[238] While there is a lack of secondary sources directly on Hmong material artifacts, some migration scholars have examined the significance of cultural artifacts. For examples, please see Faida Abu-Ghazaleh, *Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Material Cultural Artifacts* (El Paso, Texas: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2010), Sandra Dudley, *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand* (New York: Berhahn Books, 2010); Evan Casey and Deirdre Clemente, "Clothing the Contadini: Migration and Material Culture, 1890-1925," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2017: 5-24. Abu-Ghazaleh examines the ethnic identity of Palestinian immigrants in the U.S., offering a rare insight into the cultural policies of Palestinian Americans and their use of symbolic artifacts to memorialize Palestine, encompassing both a narrow focus on Maryland based subjects and a broad contextual analysis of Palestinian history and diaspora experiences. Dudley focuses on the Karenni refugees on the Thai-Burmese border, utilizing a material and sensory approach to argue that Karenni refugees actively shape their identity and sense of "home" through interaction with material objects, sensory experiences, and traditional rituals. Casey and Clemente challenge the stereotypes of Italian immigrants as unskilled newcomers by highlighting their industriousness, diversity, and adaptability, presenting a historical analysis of their clothing to explore how they learned and utilized American dress standards to navigate shifting understandings of nationality, class, gender, and age.

[239] Ya Po Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 2010): 165-178.

Unfortunately for the Hmong, many cultural artifacts were lost as they fled Laos. Hmong refugees did manage to carry a few items they considered to be lucky or valuable, such as silver. Although they were not able to carry other cultural items such as traditional dress or story cloths with them, the Hmong did bring and share their cultural practices, such as embroidery and farming. Once the Hmong resettled in the U.S., they continued to practice their cultural traditions and celebrations. The Hmong also brought with them their oral traditions and stories which they have been able to preserve and pass down to their children. As the older generations have started to pass away, a fear of losing their culture and history has surfaced. The older generations hope the younger generations remember their background and culture.

The Hmong were experts in craftmanship; silversmithing is one example. Silver was regarded as a precious metal that carried both material and symbolic significance within the Hmong culture. In Hmong tradition, silver was highly valued for its durability and beauty, making it a preferred choice for crafting jewelry and ornaments. Beyond its physical properties, silver also held spiritual and ceremonial importance. It was believed to possess protective qualities, warding off negative energies and promoting good fortune.[240] Kay Ying Lo, a Hmong refugee who initially resettled in New York with her family before relocating to North Carolina with her husband, described the effects of silver as "preserve[ing] positive energy within you, as well as to make all the negative things go away…[silver] are protectors of our body and making certain that nothing negative will come to us."[241]

---

[240] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2010): 108.

[241] Kay Ying Lo, interview by Touger Vang, February 24, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106795?ln=en

Due to the protective qualities of silver, some Hmong carried it with them as they fled Laos, whether it was ornate jewelry or coins from the French-Indo China era of the early 1900s. Kay reflected on the silver coins her father brought with them. For Kay, the coins represent the memories of "things that [her] family brought straight from Laos to Thailand."[242] She recalled how her father was not sure that the French-Indo coins would be valuable or that they would be able to "use these monies," but because they were "pure silver" they were "lucky coins."[243] For Kay, these objects represented a memory of loss and uncertainty, but also of luck and good fortune. The coins were a connection to her past and her home and have since become a family heirloom which she eventually plans to pass down the to her children "to look at and preserve."[244]

In Hmong culture, jewelry, especially silver jewelry, was a symbol of cultural identity and heritage. Hmong individuals wore jewelry to express their belonging to the Hmong community and showcase their pride in their cultural roots. While jewelry was often reserved for and worn in traditional ceremonies, rituals, and important occasions, it was thought to bring luck, protection, and blessings to the wearer.[245] Kay and her husband lived peacefully in North Carolina for a few years before he became ill and passed away. After her husband passed, Kay became ill. A man in the Hmong community recommended that she find and wear silver jewelry for protection and to ward of the negative energy that was making her sick. The Hmong believed in the co-existence of both benevolent and malevolent spirits.[246] These spirits usually appear during rituals and are often depicted as symmetrical designs and color combinations in embroidered artifacts. The Hmong used objects, such as jewelry, as a vessel to communicate with the spiritual world in order to seek protection and guidance in their lives. Kay explained, "These [the bracelets] are protectors of our body and making [*sic*] certain that nothing negative will come to us."[247] The bracelets not only helped Kay heal but also held other joyful memories and cultural connections. She knew silver bracelets were important in Hmong culture, but unfortunately her "parents couldn't bring a lot of their jewelry to this country [the United States]."[248] Collecting jewelry also allowed Kay to hold on to a tangible memory of her husband who was a jeweler. For Kay, silver jewelry brought her comfort and a connection to her heritage and the memories of her husband and homeland.[249]

---

[242] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

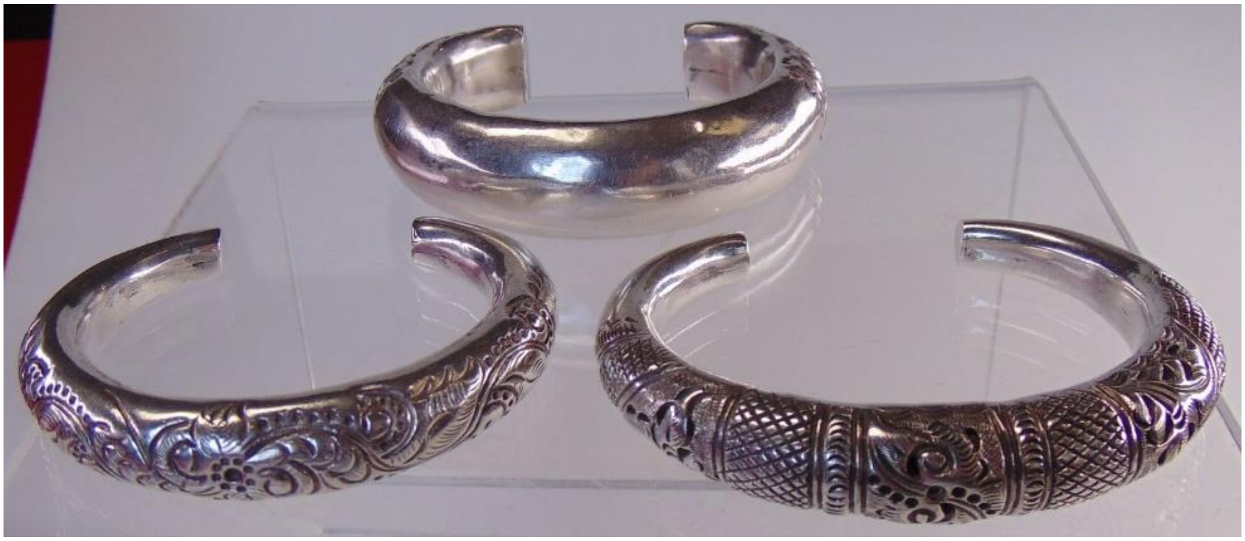
[243] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

[244] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

[245] Carolyn Brown Heinz, "The Hmong of Thailand," in *Asian Cultural Traditions* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1999): 91-115.

[246] Hao Huang, "Speaking with Spirits: The Hmong *Ntoo Xeeb* New Year Ceremony," *Asian Folklore Studies*, 63, 2004: 31-55.

Figure 5. Silver bracelets worn in Hmong culture. A small silver piece sits inside these bracelets which jingles when worn. These bracelets are worn for both beauty and ritual and are believed to keep bad energy away while instilling positive energy. The larger bracelets are worn by men and smaller ones worn by women. Contributed by Chia Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



---

[247] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[248] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[249] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

In addition to silver having protective qualities, plants were also believed to hold healing properties in Hmong culture. Herbology and agricultural practices more broadly, hold significant importance for the Hmong, were vital in their daily life, traditions, and spiritual beliefs. Traditional Hmong medicine heavily relied on the use of herbs for healing various ailments.[250] As Kay Ying Lo said, a "… pocket full of herbs and some type of seed" are often "given to a sick child, or to anyone in particular that has been ill for a long time."[251] Pang Vang, a Hmong refugee who was a teenager when he arrived to the U.S., recalled his cousin who resided in another small town in North Carolina, being told by an older Hmong gentlemen to use opium as a way to cure a rattlesnake bite when she was bitten by one while working in her garden.[252] He explained that her hand was swollen from the snake bite, but after placing a couple of drops of opium on the snake bite she could "see the venom dripping out" and "returning to normal size."[253] Many Hmong still believe in using herbs and other plants as natural remedies for illness and ailments.[254]

Hmong herbalists possessed intricate knowledge of local plants and their medicinal properties. These practitioners were responsible for maintaining the health and well-being of their community members. Although Hmong herbalists specialize in herbal medicine and healing practices, family members also played a role in making sure the family stayed healthy. In part to their animistic beliefs, the Hmong believed, plants and herbs provide protection and balance the natural and supernatural realms.[255] As Kay explained, “herbs and seeds are sewn [in a pocket] to protect the body and to preserve the soul.”[256]

---

[250] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 29-30 and 130.
[251] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[252] Pang Vang (Hmong refugee) interviewed by author, November 9, 2023.
[253] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.
[254] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

Historically, the Hmong have relied heavily on oral tradition for cultural preservation and passing on history, memory, folklore, and other cultural practices such as farming. Oral tradition constitutes the very essence and foundational core of Hmong cultural identity, history, and customs.[257] Kay Ying Lo alluded to the importance of the Hmong language and background when she stated, “The culture is extremely important but along with that culture, you must devote your time to learning the Hmong language.”[258] Nhia Yang, a Hmong soldier and refugee expressed similar sentiment when he said, “We can speak others’ languages for a bit but then, we need to come back and speak our own language again. These things are our Hmong culture.”[259]

Although spoken language is not considered a material artifact, it does contribute to other aspects of material culture. The Hmong did not have a written record until the mid-twentieth century and largely passed down cultural traditions, practices, and history orally, however, they did use embroidery and needlework as a form of written record.[260] Embroidery was arguably the practice that most clearly defined the Hmong culture.[261] Embroidery has served as a powerful symbol of identity, heritage, and artistic expression. For the Hmong people, embroidery was not merely a decorative craft but a deeply ingrained cultural practice that carried historical narratives and preserved their unique traditions.[262]

---

[255] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 29-30 and 130.

[256] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

[257] Don Wilcox, *Hmong Folklife* (Hmong Natural Association of North Carolina, 1986): 27-28 and G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 47-72.

[258] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

[259] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.

[260] Hmong writing was not created until 1959 when Shong Lue Yang developed a semi-syllabic script, known as *pahawh Hmong*. It has a complex grammar system with unique word order patterns. William Allen Smalley, Chia Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang, *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and John Noble Wilford “Carvings From Cherokee Script’s Dawn,” *New York Times* (June 2009): https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/science/23cherokee.html?ref=science

[261] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

Story cloths, or story quilts, were one form of embroidered artifacts which held significant value in Hmong culture and were a popular example of textile art that often included colorful and vibrant images to depict important cultural folklores, history, displacement and resettlement, and to preserve their culture across the generations.[263] Story cloths have also been used to strengthen cultural identity and pride among the Hmong, especially after the fall of Laos, while also allowing them to connect to their heritage and maintain a sense of connection to their homeland. The story quilts can also act as a universal language to teach non-Hmong people their history and cultural.[264]

Chia Yang, a Hmong refugee who was resettled to North Carolina in 1992 with her husband, Tong Xiong, taught and practiced embroidery to the young women and girls while in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand. She recalled her time there as "a teacher in charge of creating samples for the women in our camp, Vinai. I had to make these samples and then the women would take it and reproduce it."[265] However, the tools to embroider were not always available so Hmong women had to use whatever was accessible. She explained, “When we [Hmong refugees] were transferred to Phanat Nikhom [Thai refugee camp] there wasn’t much cloth so I made this one [embroidery] without a border. I told the children to draw it and I embroidered it. I embroidered the animals.”[266] The animals depicted in the story cloth were animals native to Laos and the mountains in the background represented the homeland they were leaving. The story cloth also depicted two rainbows. In Hmong culture, rainbows were feared and seen as representations of dragons. For some Hmong, rainbows often mean death as they come after the dark rains.[267] After narrowly escaping with her life and finding brief refuge in a Thai refugee camp, Chia Yang was still in the storm. While the immediate and heaviest rains may have lifted as Chia escaped with her life to find temporary refuge in a Thai refugee camp, rainbows emerged to show the death, destruction, and devastation that will forever haunt her. The story cloth Chia made while in the refugee camp preserved a memory of her homeland as she sat in the camp, uncertain about her future.

---

[262] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 165-178.

[263] Many Hmong are concerned this art is dying and will become lost. For a short story, see Pat Schneider, "Hmong Story Cloths a Fading Art: Now Women Also Use Sewing Skills for Others," *Madison Capital Times*, January 29, 2002.

[264] Embroidery and needlework is one of the more significant practices and traditions within the Hmong culture. There have been countless papers, articles, and books written on Hmong embroidery. For some examples, please see: Vincent Her, "Searching for Sources of Hmong Identity in Multicultural America," in *Hmong and American* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012): 31-46; Corey Hickner-Johnson, "Taking Care in the Digital Realm: Hmong Story Cloths and the Poverty of Interpretation on HmongEmboridery.org, *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4 (July 2016): 31-48. R. Arkenberg, "Hmong Story Cloths: Preserving Cultural Identity and Traditions through Art." *School Arts* 107, no. 2 (2007): 32-33; Ya Po Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture*, 166, 171, 177. Lary Long and Eileen Littig (producers), *Being Hmong Means Being Free: A Video Portrait of Hmong Life and Culture in Today's America* (San Francisco: Center for Asian American Media, 2000).

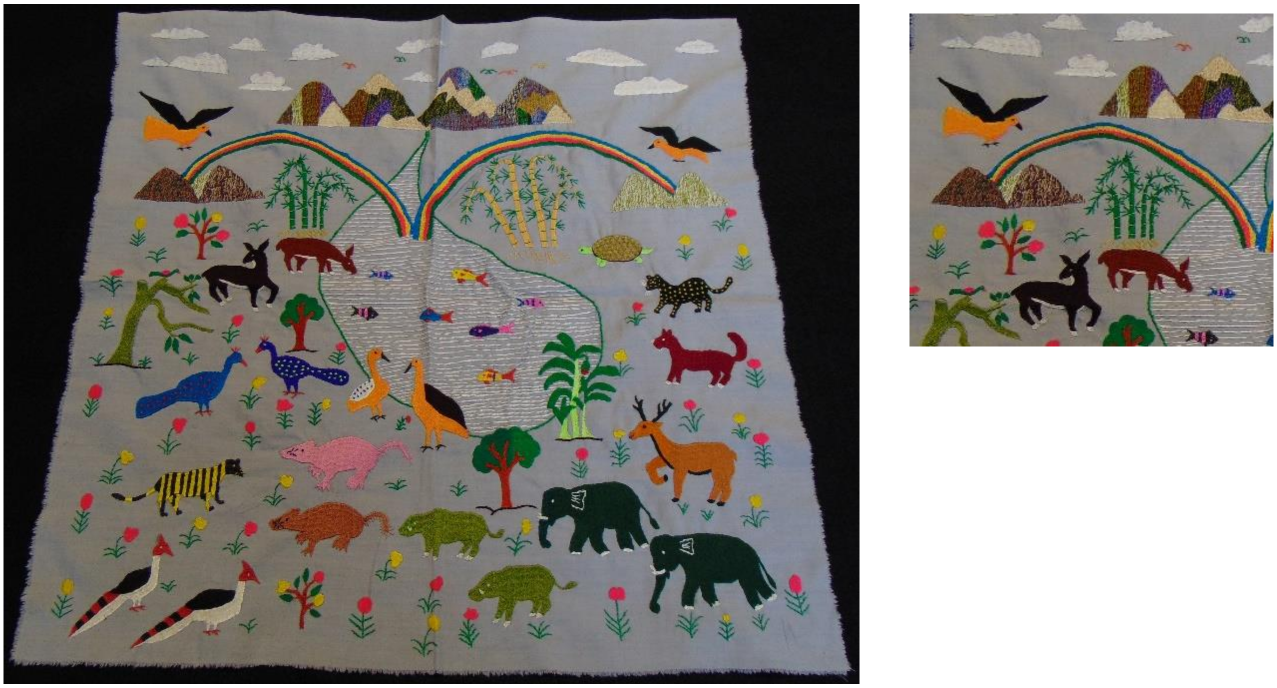
[265] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, interview by Touger Vang, February 18, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106794?ln=en

---

[266] Chia Yang and Choua Tong Xiong, February 18, 2018.

[267] Lue Vang and Judy Lewis, *Grandmother’s Path, Grandfather’s Way: Oral Lore, Generation to Generation* (San Francisco, Ca: Vang & Lewis, 1990): 93.

Figure 6. Chia Yang made this embroidered story cloth while in the refugee camps. The cloth depicts two rainbows with several animals and mountains in the background. Please see the close-up to better see the stitching. Contributed by Chia Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



Story cloths were also used to depict popular folklore. Vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and carefully crafted scenes brought the folklore to life as each stich represented a part of the story, making these story cloths accessible to both those familiar with the story and those encountering them for the first time.[268] As Law Thao, a child of a Hmong refugee explained, "Our story cloths hold the stories of our people from truth to great urban legends, it teaches us lessons, light-hearted moments and sparks conversations about our culture. So many of our stories are told orally and passed down from each generation."[269] He continued and said that

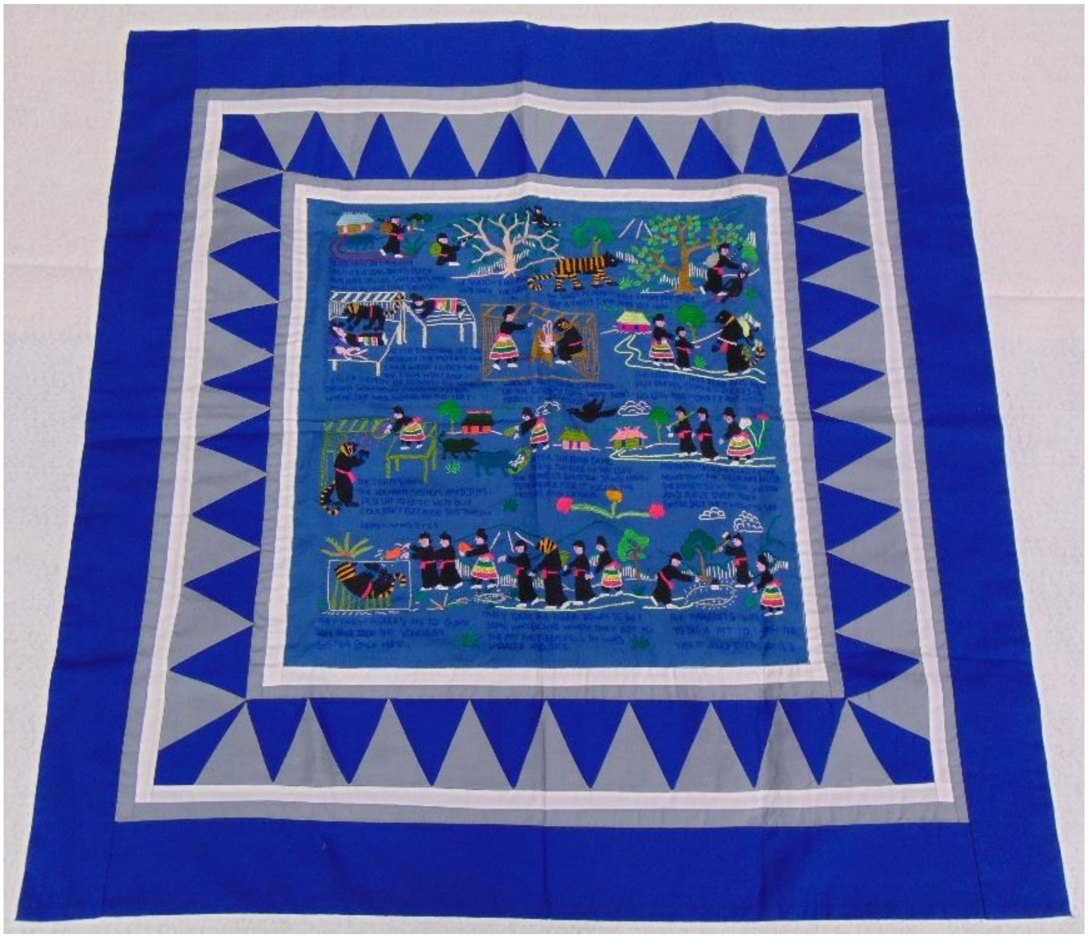
---

[268] Hibah Ansari, "Hmong women sold their embroidery in refugee camps for $1 apiece. The culture they documented is beyond value," *Sahan Journal*, July 20, 2020, https://sahanjournal.com/arts/hmong-paj-ntaub-hmong-archives/

[269] This story has been adapted as YouTube video. Law Thao is a Hmong content creator whose YouTube channel visually recreates Hmong folklore. Law Thao, "Hmong Oral Stories: Nuj Nplhaib thiab Ntxawm," February 11, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgIQ2wHyj00

"Some [Hmong] have captured the oral stories in the Hmong story cloth, also known as the paj ntuab. Our people stitched these stories of rich histories and folktales."[270] For example, Houa Yang, a Hmong refugee who resettled to North Carolina, embroidered a story cloth depicting one of the most famous folktales of Ntxawm and the Tiger, sometimes referred to as Nuj Nplabhaib, a story about love and sacrifice.[271]

Figure 7. A story cloth depicting the folklore, Ntxawm and the Tiger. Contributed by Houa Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



---

[270] Law Thao, "Hmong Oral Stories: Nuj Nplhaib thiab Ntxawm."

[271] Houa Yang, "Folk Tale Story Cloth," Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, NC, https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102770?ln=en#?xywh=752%2C380%2C4106%2C1669

Story cloths also offered financial opportunities both in refugee camps and, for some, after arriving in the United States. During their time in the camps, Hmong women would embroider quilts to sell, often for just a few dollars. Pang Vang, a Hmong refugee himself who resettled to the United States when he was young, returned to the refugee camps in the early 2000s to help process the Hmong refugees who were still waiting. He recalled purchasing story cloths from everyone, even if they "weren't very good."[272] Pang still holds onto a box of story cloths that he bought. Brian Xiong, a Hmong refugee and now professor who now lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, recalled watching his mother sew story cloths when his family was in the Ban Vinai refugee camp. She would then sell these cloths for one dollar to help generate some extra income while in the camp.[273] Some Hmong women continued to sell their story cloths after they arrived in the U.S. to contribute to the household income.[274]

In addition to depicting scenery or folk lore, story cloths and other Hmong textiles often included embroidered designs, also called motifs, which had a specific meaning or representation. Two different representations of the bull are used in the story cloth that was intended to be sold by Chia Yang's grandmother while she was in a refugee camp. The bull motif is represented by the "L" and the heart sharped design. The serpent is the larger zigzag pattern. The serpent and bull hold cultural significance in Hmong culture as they are often used to represent the moon and sun, respectively. Together, the bull and serpent represent reincarnation. [275]

---

[272] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[273] Hibah Ansari, "Hmong women sold their embroidery in refugee camps for $1 apiece. The culture they documented is beyond value." While refugee camps are temporary facilities built to provide immediate protection and assistance, it was not uncommon for camps to develop an economy and operate as a small city. For more on refugee camp economies, please see: Mohamad Alloush, J. Edward Taylor, Anubhab Gupta, Ruben Irvin Rojas Valdes, and Ernesto Gonzalez-Estrada, "Economic Life in Refugee Camps," *World Development* 20 (2017): 1-14. For information on how refugee camps operate, please see: "Refugee Camps," UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, accessed March 11, 2024, https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/#:~:text=From%20cell%20phone%20stores%20to,built%20in%20a%20refugee%20camp.

[274] Hibah Ansari, "Hmong women sold their embroidery in refugee camps for $1 apiece. The culture they documented is beyond value." Recognizing the value of the Hmong story cloths made and sold in camps and wanting to honor his late mother, Brian Xiong formed a partnership with an archive in Madison, Wisconsin to take a collection of nearly 700 quilts.

Figure 8. A story cloth that made with the intention of being sold while in the refugee camp. Contributed by Chia Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.

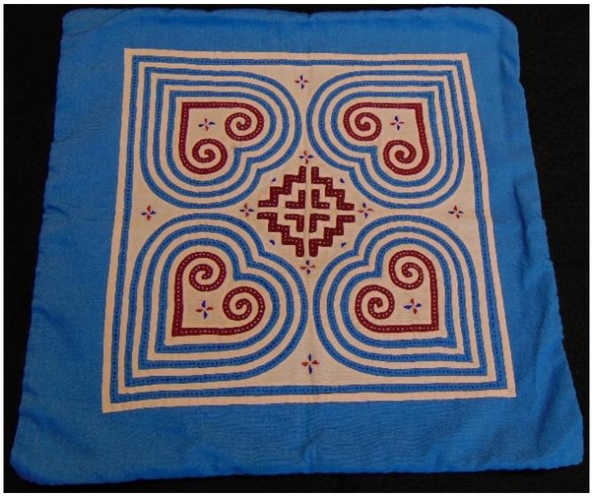


Figure 9. Two motif examples. The left is an example of a bull and serpent motif and the right is another representation of a bull motif. Contributed by Chia Yang. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.

Hmong spirituality was intimately intertwined with their traditional dress, which held deep symbolic meaning and served as a visual representation of their spiritual beliefs. The vibrant and intricately embroidered clothing worn by Hmong are not merely a form of adornment, but a manifestation of their connection to the natural world and ancestral spirits.

---

[275] Simeon S. Magliveras, "Hmong Textiles, Symmetries, Perception, and Culture," *Anthropology and Ontological Symmetry* 12, no. 11 (2020): 1829.

Each embroidered motif and color choice carries specific significance, often reflecting elements from nature, spirits, and cosmological beliefs. For instance, intricate patterns resembling animals, plants, and celestial bodies represented the Hmong’s reverence for nature and their belief in the interconnectedness of all living beings. Additionally, wearing traditional Hmong clothing during significant life events and ceremonies was believed to invoke blessings and protection from the spiritual realm. Pang Vang explained how dress and embroidery connect both the physical and spiritual world. In Hmong culture, when a young woman was to be married, her mother would sew and embroider her daughter a skirt which would include the colors representative of the clan.[276] In this way, the act of donning Hmong attire became a tangible expression of their spirituality, fostering a profound sense of cultural identity and preservation through generations.[277]

One item of traditional Hmong clothing that held special significance for Kay Lo Yang was her mother’s “back collar.” Hmong women embroidered aprons, known as back collar, as part of their traditional attire and served as a visible marker of Hmong identity. Back collars were commonly worn during special events, ceremonies, and festivals. As Kay explained, back collars were given during important cultural events such as weddings. She said, “In the old Hmong tradition, you were sewn traditional cloths for when you got married. Your relatives who were close to you [or fond of you] would stitch a collar onto the back.”[278]

Many Hmong women embroidered back collars for either themselves, their daughters, or granddaughters. The intricate designs and patterns showcased the artisan’s creativity and mastery of traditional Hmong needlework techniques, a tradition that was passed down through the generations. Creating a back collar often demonstrated a mastery of embroidering and can be a significant rite of passage for young Hmong girls as it symbolized their transition into womanhood.[279] The creation and exchange of back collars also strengthened social bonds within the Hmong community as it was a way for individuals to show respect, gratitude, and affection for one another. Kay admired some of her mother's skill at sewing and embroidery when she said, "These were my mom's. They are very old. These were probably made in the forties or thirties. If you look at them, you can tell they are very old. If you look at it, there are different types. Some are cross-stitched, some are cut cloth, and some are pieced together. I don't even know about it that much, I only know a little bit of cross stitch embroidery. My mother was very good at sewing."[280]

---

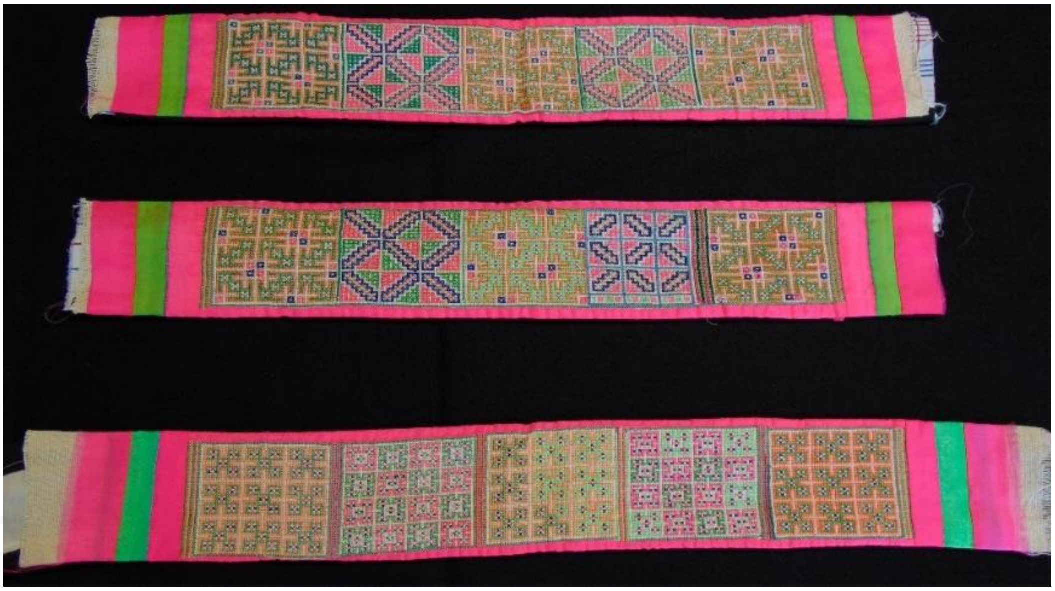
[276] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.
[277] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 137-151.
[278] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

In addition to collars, belts were also part of the traditional Hmong dress. Kay recalled with some emotion the memory of her mother teaching her and her sisters how to embroider with whatever scrap fabric they had on hand. The objects Kay and her sisters made when they first arrived in New York hold special memories for her. She reminisced about a belt she and her sister made, "This is something that my older sister and I…this is something that I found to be very unique because when we first came to America, that was in Syracuse, New York, we didn't know how to buy the fabrics. So my mom gave us rice bags to use."[281] She recalled with some fondness of how her mom, who has since passed, taught her and her sister how to embroider and sew. She said, "My mom was a very good artist when it came to embroidery. She was so great at embroidery."[282]

---

[279] G.Y. Lee and Nicholas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*, 101-105.
[280] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[281] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.
[282] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

Figure 10. Kay Ying Lo's mother was a skilled at embroidery and sewing. Above are images of belts Kay and her sister made out of rice bags when they first arrive to the United States. Contributed by Kay Ying Lo. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



Hmong traditional dress served as a visual representation of identity, heritage, and belonging. Each intricately designed outfit, often handmade, reflected the wearer's clan, region of origin, social status, and symbols of cultural significance. Similar to the story cloths, embroidered clothing also commonly used motifs in their designs. In the belt Kay and her sister made, the serpent and one version of the bull was used together four times to make a home motif which some scholars have argued was used to represent reincarnation of the home.[283] Pang Vang would support this theory when he said that in addition to wearing the skirt her mother sewed on her wedding day, when a Hmong woman died she would be buried in this same skirt so that "she can find her family…[and] be reconnected in the afterlife to her mother" and then reincarnated.[284]

---

[283] Simeon S. Magliveras, "Hmong Textiles, Symmetries, Perception, and Culture," 1829.

Figure 11. A close-up image of Kay Ying Lo's belt from figure 10 to better show the intricate design. Contributed by Kay Ying Lo. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.

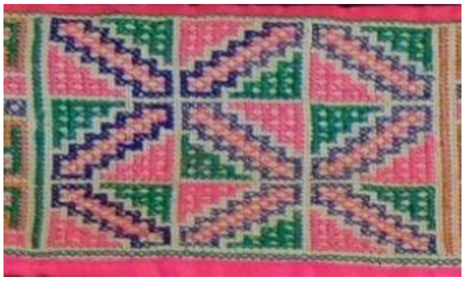
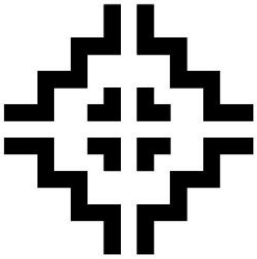


Figure 12. An example of the home motif which is seen in Kay Ying Lo's belt. Contributed by Kay Ying Lo. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



Furthermore, the passing down of these garments from generation to generation fostered a sense of continuity and intergenerational bonds, reinforcing the importance of cultural preservation within the community. Nhia Yang reflected in almost a panicked tone about how the younger generations do not seem to want to wear tradition Hmong clothing and feared losing his culture and identity. He urged the younger Hmong generations to "please remember your culture…wear your xaus [Hmong necklace], you're going to wear your Hmong cloths, and you’re going to wear your phuam [Hmong head wrap].”[285] Hmong traditional dress embodied their history, identity, and cultural pride that continues to be cherished and celebrated.

---

[284] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

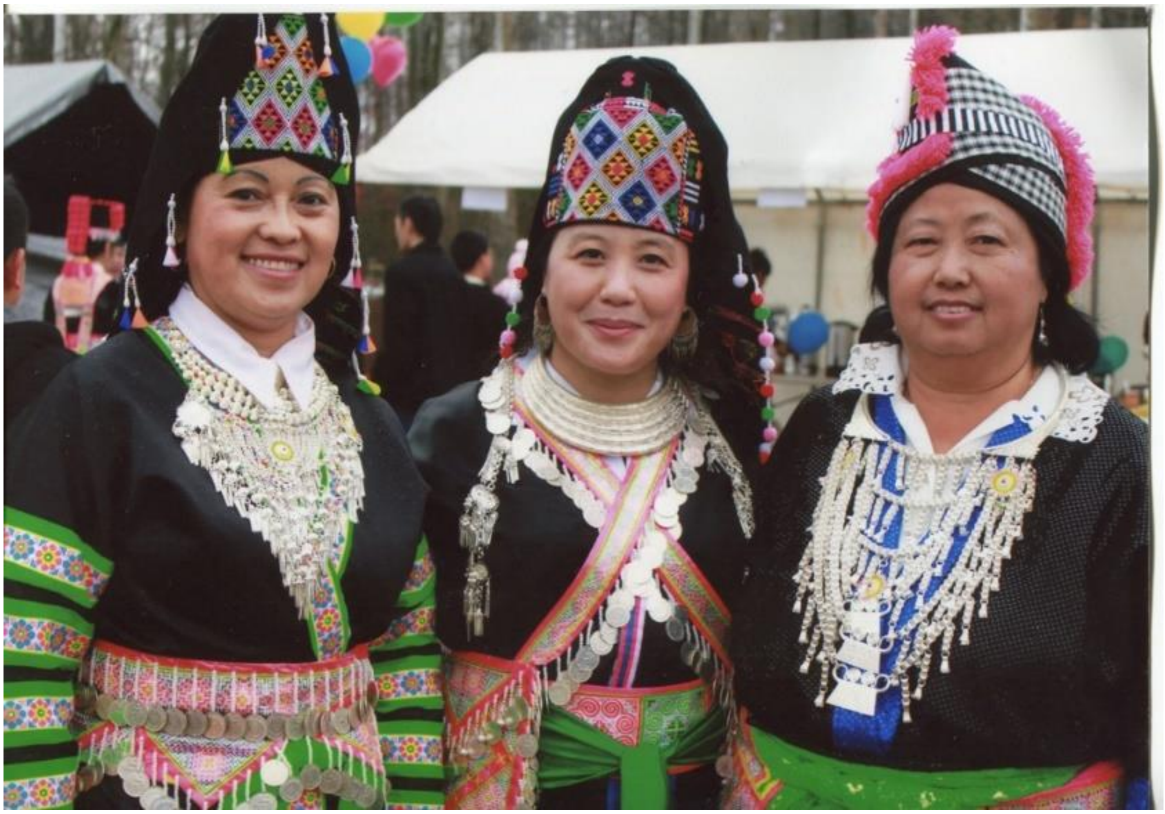
The New Year celebration, which typically takes place in late autumn or early winter, marking the end of the harvest season and the beginning of a new agricultural cycle is the most significant cultural celebration where families came together to honor their ancestors, strengthen familial bonds, and partake in various traditional festivities. The New Year celebration typically follows the pattern of the moon, but since resettling in the U.S. the New Year celebration occurs the weekend of Thanksgiving. Pang Vang gave the explanation that it was easier for the Hmong community to come together to celebrate over a national holiday when companies are typically closed.[286] Some of the hallmark features of Hmong New Year celebrations includes donning traditional clothing, including vibrant embroidery and elaborate silver jewelry; eating traditional food including bamboo sticky rice, spring rolls, and Hmong pork or beef meatballs; performing traditional dances; participating in recreational sports, both modern and traditional events such as volleyball, flag football, and “tuj lub” or “spin-top” which resembles a combination of baseball, golf, and bocce; and the coveted “pov pob” or “ball toss” where young boys and girls line up and toss a soft, baseball-sized decorative ball to the person they are interested in courting. Yang Por Xiong explained the significance of the Hmong New Year,

---

[285] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018.
[286] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

> When the year is over, the Hmong has the New Year celebration where people pov pob (ball toss) and the youth get together and have fun. Everyone studies at school and works hard all year long but on that one day, they all take a break from school and stop working so they can be together and greet one another in celebration. So, I want everyone to understand that we have our own culture. If anyone doesn't know about it, we'd love to tell them but if they do know then I hope they'd join us in friendship so that we'd all learn to get along better than before.[287]

Figure 13. Kay Ying Lo (pictured middle) and friends wearing traditional Hmong dress at the 2011 Hmong New Year Festival in Newton, North Carolina. Contributed by Kay Ying Lo. Catawba County Library and Historical Association of Catawba County, Digital NC.



---

[287] Yang Por Xiong, interview by Houa Yang, May 18, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en. The younger Hmong refugee generation and the second generation of Hmong Americans who were born to Hmong refugees in the U.S. have been very open and eager to discuss their cultural background and history and even invite me to attend their New Year celebration. The older generations of Hmong refugees have been a little more reluctant to talk although this is probably due to language barriers and with being a white woman. The older generation is still willing to talk but usually only to other Hmong.

After the initial resettlement of Hmong refugees, some organizations, such as the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej, a cultural center located in Newton, North Carolina, began hosting the New Year celebration. The Hmong Southeast Puavpheej hosted their first New Year celebration in 1992 at Albemarle High School in Albemarle, North Carolina. The tradition continues annually and all Hmong in the surrounding states are invited to attend.[288]

Farming was another practice fundamental to Hmong cultural identity. In part to their indigenous background, the Hmong have a long understanding and connection to the land. Hmong agricultural practices often emphasized sustainable and eco-friendly techniques.[289] For example, the Hmong would commonly use hemp, a highly renewable and regenerative crop for their clothing. The traditional Hmong skirts women wore were typically made from hemp.[290] The Hmong would also use sustainable practices for their meals. A common Hmong dish includes steaming sticky rice in a bamboo stalk. Once the rice is cooked, the Hmong would split the bamboo and eat it directly from the stalk.[291] While the Hmong value the land and view the interconnectedness the physical and spiritual world, these practices were also essential to learn as they were needed to survive. Hmong refugee Tou Lee "remembers how it was in Laos, growing things. But, in Laos, if you didn't know how to utilize the land, you wasn't going to eat."[292]

For some Hmong refugees, practicing traditional farming techniques and growing food common in Laos was a way to preserve the memory of their home after being forcibly displaced. Tou and Chue Lee, owners of Lee's One Fortune Farm near Marion, North Carolina were an example of how Hmong refugees have preserved the memory of family and culture through agricultural practices. The Lees mainly grew "specialty Asian fruits and vegetables and heirloom rice. Four varieties of it."[293] Tou also used, and continues to use, some of the Hmong traditional tools, such as a hoe and pick axe to cultivate his land. Tou recalled how he learned traditional farming practices and techniques back in Laos with his siblings. He said, "So all of us, as kids, as soon as we were able to hold a tool in your hand, we're ushered out to the fields to help." The Lees continue to make a living by selling their produce at the Asheville farmer's market. Local restaurants and other business have become essential customers of the Lees and often purchase their entire stock of vegetables and fruit.[294]

---

[288] "Our History," Hmong Southeast Puavpheej, https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/about/

[289] Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud, "Hmong Upland Livelihood Essentials" in *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderlands*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015): 35-46.

[290] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[291] Mai Yang (second -generation Hmong American) interviewed by author, December 8, 2023. Bamboo sticky rice is still eaten today which can be found and enjoyed at the North Carolina Hmong New Year.

[292] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming," *My Home, NC on PBS NC*, May 2, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOZOBjCgMEY.

Cash crops such as vegetables, herbs, and flowers can provide economic opportunities for Hmong families, helping them integrate into larger U.S. market economies. The Lees have used their expertise in farming and agriculture to create a thriving and popular business in western North Carolina. Over the years, they have created relationships with community partners, businesses, and restaurants who will purchase their entire stock of some produce.[295]

Practicing Hmong farming techniques was a form of therapy for Tou Lee as it provided him with a sense of connection to his past and homeland while also giving him and his wife some economic independence.[296] The Lees have also used their business as an opportunity to teach general North Carolinian population about Hmong history, culture, and cooking practices.[297] Some Hmong Americans have expressed interest in learning how to grow traditional Asian crops like their parents and grandparents did. In a *Tennessean* article, Hmong American Chaoya Yang explained that when she and her siblings were younger, "our parents always were growing stuff, and we never learned how to do it. But there's a growing community of young people who do want to learn how to grow their own food."[298] In response to the growing interest Tou and Chue Lee eventually hopes to open a multi-cultural center to teach agricultural practices to the general community and "teach people that, yes, you can grow this variety of rice, here in the mountains of western North Carolina" as a way to give back to the region, an area, "to be honest, has given my family a lot."[299] Tou elaborated, explaining that he hopes "this style of farming that we do with the Hmong culture, that it doesn't die with my generation."[300] Chue agreed with her husband and said, "If nobody takes the mantle and uses it, we'll lose it."[301]

---

[293] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

[294] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

[295] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

[296] Trauma informed care is a relatively new practice in refugee advocacy work, but has quickly become standard practice. To learn more about trauma informed care see, Joe Alper, *Facilitating Health Communication with Immigrant, Refugee, and Migrant Populations through the use of Health Literacy and Community Engagement Strategies: Proceedings of a Workshop* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2017); Aniyizhai Annamalai, ed. *Refugee Health Care: An Essential Medical Guide* (New York: Springer, 2014); and Hyojin Im and Laura ET Swan, "Capacity Building for Refugee Mental Health in Resettlement: Implementation and Evaluation of Cross-Cultural Trauma-Informed Care Training," *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 22, no. 5 (2020): 923-934.

Although many Hmong continue to practice cultural customs and rituals such as embroidery, farming, and the New Year celebration, many fear that they are not doing enough to preserve their cultural identity. Some Hmong refugees stress the importance to the younger generations about remembering that they are Hmong regardless of where they live in the world. Yang Por Xiong, a Hmong refugee who was part of one of the last groups to flee Laos said, "I think the first thing I want my children to know is that everyone who is Hmong, no matter where you may live in the world, if you are Hmong, then you are one family."[302] Some of the fear may stem from not having much of a written record since the Hmong have historically passed down their culture and heritage orally. Consequently, practicing Hmong traditions and customs was the only way to preserve their culture. As Yang expressed, “If you don’t preserve your culture, when someone asks you about it-- especially if you are an educated person someone will wonder about your background-- you might say that you do have a culture but if they can’t find any sort of record about it then it’s almost as if your culture really didn’t exist.”[303]

---

[297] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

[298] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life': In North Carolina mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty," *The Tennessean*, September 30, 2021, https://www.tennessean.com/in-depth/news/american-south/2021/09/30/lees-one-fortune-farm-nc-hmong-refugees-grow-rice-food/5712965001/

[299] "How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming."

[300] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life.'"

[301] Mackensy Lunsford, "'This is life.'"

[302] Yang Por Xiong, May 18, 2018.

Other Hmong refugees share a similar guilt and fear about losing their cultural identity as the older generations, the ones who lived and remembered Laos, however briefly, have started to pass away. This unfortunate reality has motivated many Hmong to work on preserving their history and customs so that their community can continue to heal and their cultural identity remain.[304] As Kay Ying Lo said, “for generations in the future, I want them to come back and really learn about the history and culture of their Hmong people.”[305] Bee Chong Kao Vang expressed similar feelings when he said, “My greatest desire is for this generation to leave behind what is not beneficial and to continue to strive towards better.”[306] Nao Cho Lo agreed, “In the future, I think, we are Hmong, we all came from Laos so we need to help one another and love one another. We need to share one heart and soul so that in the future we can be strong like a tree, and become like a forest.”[307]

---

[303] Yang Por Xiong, May 18, 2018.

[304] Cindy Vang, Pa Thor, and Michael Sieng, “Influencing Factors of Loneliness among Hmong Older Adults in the Premigration, Displacement, and Postmigration Phases,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 3 (2021): 3464-3485.

[305] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

[306] Bee Chong Kao Vang, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106799?ln=en.

[307] Nao Chao Lo, interview by Siobhan Loendorf, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106801?ln=en&viewer=iframe

While some Hmong sought to preserve their customs and traditions for their culture, other Hmong refugees wanted to make sure their story was written into the historical record so the general public knew who they were and where they came from. As Neng Xiong stated, "[our culture needs] to be preserved so that not just Americans but the whole world can see that Hmong, we have our own culture and traditions. I want everyone to understand that we didn't just all of a sudden happen to come here but that it was through many tragic events that happened which led us to end up in America."[308] Yang Por Xiong expressed a similar feeling of reconciliation when he said, "I hope everyone would be able to work together to collect all the old history and traditions of the Hmong. Whatever that the youth in this generation has created to tell about our culture, if it's possible, this should all be collected together so 200 or 300 years from now we'll have a comprehensive history of our people. It should also show the accomplishments of the generation that grew up in this country."[309]

Hmong refugees called on the future generations to continue practicing their customs and traditions to maintain some cultural identity even if that meant adapting to fit into American society. The older Hmong generations urged the younger generations to remember the core values of what it meant to be Hmong. As Bee Chong Kao Vang stated, "It doesn't matter how highly educated you are, you must remember that you are Hmong. Be humble and live with your fellow Hmong. It doesn't matter how rich you are, you must remember you are Hmong and remember to love your fellow Hmong so we can be united as a people and the world can respect us."[310]

---

[308] Neng Xiong, interview by Houa Yang, June 25, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106800

[309] Yang Por Xiong, May 18, 2018.

[310] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.

The forced displacement of the Hmong, followed by resettlement in a Western, English-speaking nation, threatened to erode the Hmong language, customs, traditions, and cultural heritage while paradoxically becoming an indelible facet of the Hmong identity. Bee Chong Kao Vang perceptively grasped the imminent threat of cultural displacement and passionately advocated that the indispensable value of Hmong collectivism must steadfastly endure in future generations. With profound conviction, he declared, "If our Hmong family does not love one another and understand one another and if we just want to sabotage our leaders and our land then we will never be able to achieve anything. This is the beginning for the 21st century generation."[311] Nao Cho Lo concurred, "When we [the older Hmong generation] have passed away you will still remember and you will be able to use these as lessons to teach your children, your family, and everyone."[312]

While some Hmong viewed cultural preservation as a way to remember their history, Neng Xiong viewed it as a way to honor and remember those of the past who risked and sacrificed their lives to get the other Hmong to safety. Neng reflected on the photographs of General Vang Pao, who did manage to escape to the U.S., and his uncle, who was killed during the Secret War, when he said, "This is so the new generations can see and know the reasons, conflicts, and the price that had to be paid for our Hmong people to be here in this country. It's because of leaders like General Vang Pao and Colonel Song Leng. In these pictures that I've brought, all the old leaders' blood and sweat, they are the reason we are able to be in this country."[313]

---

[311] Bee Chong Kao Vang, June 25, 2018.
[312] Nao Cho Lo, June 25, 2018.
[313] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.

Some Hmong refugees seem to recognize and understand that traditional customs will continue to adapt as future generations continue to integrate into U.S. culture and become more "Americanized." Regardless, the older Hmong generations argued that is important to remember that they are still Hmong. Yang Por Xiong asserted, "I think in the future we'll have those two different divided cultures but even if that's the case, it's ok as long as we all understand that we are Hmong and we share a common history. I think that will still unite us as a family." [314] Pang Vang elaborated on Yang Por Xiong's prophecy and said that as the younger generations grow up, he does see them as becoming more "progressive" and "pushing back" against some of cultural practices, especially related to gendered and sexuality beliefs while the older generations tend to follow more conservative thinking. However, Pang firmly believed that both the older and younger generations are determined to "preserve their Hmongness."[315]

Even though aspects of the Hmong culture will most likely continue to change as they adapt to American society, the older Hmong generations hoped the younger generations will continue to practice the core values of their culture, such as harmony and cooperation. Kay Ying Lo explained that, "We are all Hmong so we all have to love one another. You shouldn't only think about yourself but you should think about others as well."[316] Nhia Thong Yang echoed this statement and believed that the Hmong need lead by example and promote good value across the community when he said, "But if you strive to be good role models for your children and others, then the world will see and praise you. This person is a good role model so try to be like them. They have many children but their children have great character. They are righteous in all they do."[317] In general, the values of the Hmong reflect a harmonious blend of familial loyalty, communal solidarity, cultural preservation, and a profound appreciation for the natural world as evident in their agricultural techniques and shamanistic practices, values that shine through during one of their darkest hours after being forcibly removed from their ancestral lands. Cultural tradition and preservation have become even more important.

---

[314] Yang Por Xiong, May 18, 2018.

[315] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023. The discussion of "Hmongness" will be discussed further in the next chapter.

[316] Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

Another core value of the Hmong was filial piety. The Hmong place great importance on respecting and caring for elders and maintaining strong intergenerational bonds. Hmong communities were built upon a sense of collective identity and mutual support. These elements contribute to the cohesion and strength of Hmong communities. While modernization and forced migration have influenced Hmong social dynamics, the core values of kinship and community continued to play a significant role in Hmong society.[318]

This filial piety can be seen in the stories of the Hmong who arrived to the United States and hoped to instill these beliefs in their children and grandchildren. It can also be seen with the Hmong refugees asking for forgiveness and understanding from the spirits of their elders. Neng Xiong expressed great concern about not practicing or honoring his culture adequately. The pressure Neng felt to preserve and pass down his culture was immense. With a heavy heart and deep regret, Neng feared that much of Hmong history has already been forgotten due to their forced displacement. Neng somberly said, "…apologies to any of the Hmong who may be … for anything that may be left unsaid or are unsatisfactory. Please have grace for those of us who are younger and are only able to tell about Hmong history through what we have read or the small portion that we have experienced. I regret that we can’t relay all our people’s histories.”[319]

---

[317] Nhia Thong Yang, June 25, 2018. Discussions on the tensions of American and Hmong culture will be discussed further in the next chapter.

[318] Ya Po Cha, *An Introduction to Hmong Culture*, 22-47.

---

[319] Neng Xiong, June 25, 2018.

CHAPTER V: "I AM PROUD TO BE HMONG:" THE EXPERIENCES OF THE YOUNGER HMONG GENERATIONS

The rain was for you
Cleansing a three-year deathwatch—
Two-hour ceremony, abridged.
Bones upon Hmong clothes.
Your blood to span
Across the centuries to come,
Wishing to be remembered
Upon the brush of culture.
One bristle wetted—
How many to make a difference?
Entail a people in flux—
Pictures warped
with the written record.

Life is once, twice, and
yet again.[320]

– "In Remembrance" (Poem)
By Naly Yang

Pang Vang was young when his family fled Laos to Thailand where he spent his early childhood in refugee camps. His family was resettled to the United States in 1982 when he was only nine years old, eventually finding his way to North Carolina. Pang has spent most of his life navigating between American society and the Hmong community, trying to harmoniously merge the two worlds. Pang found himself in what some scholars consider the "one-and-half generation."[321] Although he was born in Laos and was considered a refugee, he was young and has spent most of his life in the United States. However, this unique situation has allowed Pang to act as a "culture broker" between the first- and second-generation Hmong.[322] Pang has tirelessly dedicated his adult life to his community. In the early 2000s, he volunteered to return to Thailand to help process the Hmong refugees who still remained in refugee camps. Back in Greensboro, Pang established the Hmong Students and Alumni Association at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where he received a degree in business administration and briefly worked at the university until finding a job as the Dean of Learning Resources at Montgomery Community College in Troy, North Carolina.[323]

---

[320] Naly Yang, "In Remembrance," in *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* edited by Mai Neng Moua (St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002): 187

Pang, having a strong connection to his cultural heritage and identity, understood that a core value for the Hmong community was to support family. He acknowledged that supporting family traditionally meant tending to the land, but in America, it meant obtaining a quality education.[324] While employed at UNCG, Pang worked as an ambassador and recruited college-aged Hmong students to attend the university ultimately increasing enrollment from seven students in the early 2000s to nearly seventy Hmong students by 2009. While working at UNCG, Pang traveled across the state as a guest speaker, participated on an advisory committee for refugee and immigrants, and was the advisor for UNCG student organization, Asian Students

---

[321] First-generation included individuals who were foreign-born. Second-generation includes individuals who were born in the United States. The one-and-a-half generation includes individuals who were children when they first arrived to the U.S. For more on the different generational groups, please see: Rubén Rumbaut, "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States," *The International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1160-1205 and Leslie Berestein Rojas, "Gen 1.5: Where an immigrant generation fits in," *Southern California Public Radio* (March 21, 2012), https://archive.kpcc.org/blogs/multiamerican/2012/03/21/7963/what-is-a-1-5-where-an-immigrant-generation-fits-i/

[322] Jennifer Fernandez, "The culture broker: Touger Vang, a Hmong who has lived in the U.S. since he was 9, is trying to merge the best of his two worlds," *Greensboro News & Record*, (March 24, 2009) https://greensboro.com/news/the-culture-broker/article_df7a6791-7955-53e7-bb8f-ceaab9ad0971.html#tncms-source=login

[323] Pang Vang (Hmong refugee) interviewed by author, November 9, 2023.

[324] Jennifer Fernandez, "The culture broker."

Association.[325] One student Pang worked with, Houa Lee who was the executive director for the United Hmong Association in Hickory, credited him with helping her connect to her roots and in obtaining her job.[326] Pang hoped that the younger Hmong generations continued to be ambitious and encouraged them to enroll in college and follow their passions, but also cautioned the younger generations to remember their past and history.[327] Although Pang has helped many second-generation Hmong Americans, such as Houa Lee, not all second-generation Hmong Americans have been as fortunate.

While second-generation Hmong Americans may not have directly endured the horrors of the Secret War, faced the hardships of refugee camps, or struggled to provide financially for their families once they arrived in the United States, they still faced their own unique challenges. The significance of second-generation Hmong Americans lies in their unique position at the intersection of their Hmong heritage and their American upbringing, contributing to the broader historiography of refugee studies and cultural identity formation. Social history among second-generation Hmong Americans delves into questions of loyalty, self-determination, and cultural pride. Many second-generation individuals struggle to reconcile their dual identities and find a sense of belonging in both their Hmong heritage and American society. Their experiences shed light on the complexities of cultural identity formation and the lasting effects of refugee resettlement on subsequent generations. Intergenerational trauma, characterized by the lingering effects on one generation transmitted to future ones, is often manifested in second-generation refugee population.[328] The descendants of refugees, more broadly, and of second-generation Hmong Americans, more specifically, frequently confronted challenges related to identity, comprehension of their cultural and historical roots, and integration of American customs and language. Despite these challenges, second-generation Hmong Americans often maintain a strong sense of pride in their heritage and cultural identity. They actively participate in community events, cultural celebrations, and efforts to preserve Hmong traditions, reflecting a commitment to their refugee origins and cultural legacy. The resilience and determination of the Hmong community in North Carolina, as exemplified by their support for refugee resettlement and community empowerment, highlight the ongoing impact of refugeedom on subsequent generations and the enduring strength of Hmong cultural identity in the United States.[329]

---

[325] Jennifer Fernandez, "The culture broker."
[326] Jennifer Fernandez, "The culture broker."
[327] Jennifer Fernandez, "The culture broker."

---

[328] Intergenerational trauma, such as historical trauma stemming from events like colonization or genocide, can be passed down through verbal communication, behaviors, and neurobiological factors, potentially leading to mental health issues in affected individuals. However, acknowledging its existence and providing culturally sensitive support can help break the cycle and promote healing, though not every person or family who experiences trauma will necessarily transmit it to subsequent generations due to factors like resilience and access to resources. For examples on how intergenerational trauma has been written on from the historical perspective, please see: Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2021); Victoria Aarons, *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2020); and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, ed. *History, Trauma, and Shame: Engaging the Past Through Second Generation Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

Despite being born in the United States, second-generation Hmong Americans frequently struggled with learning English, such as Timmy Xiong. Originally born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Timmy's family relocated to North Carolina in 2009. Timmy vividly remembered the challenges he encountered, emphasizing the profound difficulty stemming from his parents' recent arrival to the U.S. when he reflected, "I grew up here in America but it was difficult for me. My parents just arrived in America and they didn't know how to read or speak English so that made school very difficult for us."[330] Despite his teachers' earnest efforts to explain and reteach the material, Timmy admitted to frequently shutting down and disengaging from class, "We [Timmy and his siblings] didn't understand English so we just sat still in class and didn't participate."[331] The language barrier extended outside the classroom as the absence of parental support for homework further underscored the uphill battle Timmy and his siblings faced in navigating their education. He recalled that "We [Timmy and his siblings] didn't understand what was taught so we didn't know how to do our homework. They [their teachers] would reteach the material several times."[332]

---

[329] Please see Abdul Wadood, Ahmed Khan, and Hidayatullah Khan, "Belonging to Nowhere: A Phenomenological Study of the Identity Crisis of the Second Generation of Afghan Refugees in Balochistan," *Journal of Business and Social Review in Emerging Economies* 6, no. 3 (2020): 1139-1147, Alice Bloch and Shirin Hirsh, "'Second Generation': Refugees and Multilingualism: Identity, Race, and Language Transmission," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no.14 (2017): 2444-2462, Janany Jeyasundaram, Luisa Yao Dan Cao, Barry Trentham, "Experiences of Intergenerational Trauma in Second-Generation Refugees: Healing Through Occupation," *Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy* 87, no. 5 (2012): 412-422, and Jennifer Huynh, "Assimilation through Transnationalism: Second-Generation Refugees and Vietnamese Transnational Organizing," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45, no. 14 (2022). Each of these studies provides discussion related to the trauma of second-generation refugees groups. Wadood, Khan, and Khan explore the sense of belonging and identity among the second-generation of Afghan refugees in Balochistan, analyzing their perceptions of self, their comfort in identifying as Afghan in the local community, and how their identity influences their daily lives, highlighting the ongoing challenges of identiy crisis for these young refugees. Bloch and Hirsh examine language practices, attitudes, and the intergenerational transmission of heritage languages among UK-born adult children of refugee parents, emphasizing the significance of heritage languages as a marker for identity amidst political discussions, national policies, and debates on race, cohesion, diversity, "Britishness," and citizenship, which often overlook or silence their positive role. Jeyasundaram, Cao, and Trentham investigate how intergenerational trauma affects the occupational lives of second-generation Ilankai Tamil and Vietnamese refugees, revealing the influence of sociohistorical, cultural, and familial contexts on their perceptions of capabilities and healing responses, particularly through occupations focused on communal care. Huynh examines second-generation transnational activism among children of refugees, particularly Vietnamese refugees in the U.S., analyzing how refugee status influences their identities and social mobility through participation in transnational organizations, revealing alternative pathways for integration.

[330] Timmy Xiong, interview by Houa Yang, May 19, 2018 in Hickory, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106796?ln=en

[331] Timmy Xiong, May 19, 2018.

Xiong Lor, a Hmong refugee who was born in Laos in 1975, but has lived in the United States since 1979 recalled a similar experience to Timmy. Xiong remembered quietly sitting in a classroom and being "lost, I was lost. I didn't know what they were talking about." He distinctly recalled the teacher needing to repeatedly provide Xiong with instructions, and that he felt completely unaware of what she was asking him to accomplish.[333] Everything about being in a classroom was a challenge for Xiong as he recalled, "it was hard for me to pronounce, and it's hard for me to learn."[334]

The struggles of the language barrier and understanding American culture extended past the school boundaries and presented challenges at home in regards to making friends. Xiong reflected on his parents' insecurities about understanding English and American culture and how they refused to allow Xiong to "bring friends home from school because we can't speak the language."[335] When his parents were finally comfortable with inviting his friends over to their house, his mother seemed to still harbor feelings of insecurity. Xiong's mother felt the need to purchase American food before his friends visited, because she was uncertain about their preferences and assumed that “they’re not going to eat rice and they’re not going to eat noodles.”[336]

---

[332] Timmy Xiong, May 19, 2018.
[333] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.
[334] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.
[335] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

Mylo Lor, born to Hmong refugees in Ramsey, Minnesota, and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, shared a similar experience to Timmy’s and Xiong’s stories. Despite attending a predominantly white and affluent school district in Milwaukee, Mylo grappled with a sense of displacement rooted in her family’s socioeconomic status and cultural background. In her parents’ home, Hmong was spoken, and Mylo did not start learning English until the age of five or six when she entered school. Lingering recollections of being pulled out of class for English as a second language course (ESL) until the fifth grade still haunted Mylo. She perceived judgment from her teachers, feeling as though they thought she was unintelligent due to her struggle with English—a perception she deeply internalized. The experience of being singled out for ESL courses became a source of embarrassment for Mylo as she reflected, “every time they [the teachers] pulled me out of class, I was embarrassed…It was hard because instead of me really wanting to learn, I took the way how I felt and the embarrassment as a bigger issue than me wanting to learn.”[337]

Despite her limited understanding of English, Mylo’s father relentlessly encouraged her to persist. He insisted on nightly reading sessions, even though he himself did not comprehend the language. The constant refrain from him was clear: “keep practicing, keep practicing.”[338] The importance of English proficiency loomed large in the integration into American communities, with children often shouldering the responsibility of interpretation and translation for their parents. Mylo recounted the challenges of being the family translator, ensuring her parents comprehended crucial information. Accompanying her parents to medical appointments, she navigated the task of interpreting for them. Despite not fully grasping the doctor's words herself, she managed to convey vital information, such as the possibility of an infection. The weight of this expectation created immense pressure, with Mylo acknowledging that it was "hard on us [her and her siblings] because they [her parents] rely on us a lot."[339]

---

[336] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

[337] Mylo Lor, interview by Emmanuel Lee, July 12, 2018 in Hickory, North Carolina, interview and abstract Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, available online https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28259/rec/1

[338] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

In addition to doctor appointments, the children of Hmong refugees found themselves acting as interpreters and translators when dealing with legal agreements. Pang Vang, a Hmong refugee who was born in Laos and a young boy when he and his family first arrived in the United States recounted a time his father relied on him for translating loan documents. During Pang's senior year in high school, despite acknowledging that "English was not my forte," he stepped up to assist in his father's ambition of purchasing land for a chicken farm in Troy, North Carolina.[340] Recalling the experience, Pang shared a pivotal moment of going to the local bank with his father, where they were informed that a down payment of twenty-five thousand dollars was required to secure the loan for the land. In a remarkable display of determination and collective support, Pang remembered family members from across the country contributing to the down payment and "we got it, the $25,000 cash" to receive a loan from their bank.[341]

---

[339] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018. A new study by the Urban Institute and UNC-Chapel Hill reveals that North Carolina's refugee and immigrant residents, who make up about one in 12 of the state's population, encounter obstacles such as language barriers and discriminatory treatment when engaging with government agencies, leading to exclusion from vital social assistance programs, with varying experiences depending on location and background, including challenges in health care access and program administration, especially highlighted among non-Spanish-speaking immigrants, including Hmong families who, still face significant language access issues, relying on second-generation members for interpretation and assistance in navigating county HHS offices. Kayla Young, "North Carolina immigrants report language, discrimination as barriers to health care." *WFAE Charlotte's NPR News Source*, November 15, 2023, https://www.wfae.org/race-equity/2023-11-15/north-carolina-immigrants-report-language-discrimination-as-barriers-to-health-care

[340] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[341] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

In addition to being responsible for providing interpretation and translation services for parents, grandparents, and extended family, many Hmong children were also expected to help take care of the household and their younger siblings. Mai Yang, a Hmong refugee who was born in St. Paul, Minnesota before she and her family moved just outside of Charlotte, North Carolina in the early 1990s reflected on feeling as though she was not able to have a "normal childhood" where she could focus on school, enjoy time with friends, or even learn about her culture and family history. Being the eldest child of her family, she became a "de facto" mother where she not only cared for her younger siblings, but also would prepare dinner and pack meals for her parents who often worked second- or third-shift jobs.[342]

The unique circumstances surrounding the upbringing of second-generation Hmong Americans contributed to an identity crisis, leaving the children of Hmong refugees contending with the complexities of defining what it truly means to be Hmong.[343] In her early childhood years, Mylo struggled with internalized embarrassment linked to her Hmong identity. She reflected on the shame she felt about bringing traditional Hmong food to school."[344] While sitting at the lunch table during the school day, Mylo remembered thinking "I can't eat that, I was embarrassed."[345] Beyond this, Mylo faced a profound sense of not being able to "fit in" with her classmates due to a fundamental lack of understanding American culture and holidays. Additionally, her family's financial constraints and their inability to afford "name brand clothing or school supplies" further exacerbated her feelings of isolation.[346] A stark example of this struggle unfolded during a school Halloween event. Though her parents could not afford an expensive costume, they sought to ensure Mylo's participation by purchasing a zebra mask from the local Dollar Tree. However, Mylo, who was shy and self-consciousness, rejected her parents' gesture, and refused to wear the mask to school because she was embarrassed.[347] This incident became a symbol of her internalized feelings of embarrassment and cultural isolation, feelings she kept from her parents, believing they "would not understand." [348]

---

[342] Mai Yang (second -generation Hmong American) interviewed by author, December 8, 2023.
[343] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[344] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[345] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[346] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Identity struggles of second-generation Hmong Americans extended beyond their place in the workforce, education systems, and broader American society to also include finding their place within their Hmong community. Mai Yang, shouldering the responsibility of caring for her younger siblings and parents before they left work, revealed a heart-rending reality. Mai identified her parents' demanding work schedules and the absence of family conversations about their past as one contributing factor to her identity struggling when she reflected, "They [her parents] had to support the family. They had to be at work a lot of the times. And so that education of sharing their history and their experiences with me, there was just not time to do that…and so I didn't understand that growing up."[349] Mai has since asked her mother why they did not share their history when they were children and her mother simply replied with, "I just didn't have time."[350] Mylo Lor echoed a similar sentiment, expressing how she consciously distanced herself from her community, in part to her belief that her parents would not understand her feelings, resulting in a limited understanding of Hmong culture. She ranked her knowledge on her Hmong background as a "five on a scale from one to ten."[351]

---

[347] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[348] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[349] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[350] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[351] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Navigating the challenges of integrating into both American and Hmong cultures, second-generation Hmong Americans found themselves grappling with a self-described identity crisis. Mylo reflected on her "competing" identity in her young teenage years when she said, "Initially, if somebody was to ask me, I would say I'm Hmong."[352] However, much of the general public did not know who the Hmong were and according to Mylo, many native-born Americans would respond with "what is that?"[353] She then began identifying herself as "Asian American."[354] Yet for Mylo, even embracing the identity of being Asian American was problematic as she viewed herself as American, having been born and raised in the midwestern United States and living in North Carolina since the age of thirteen. While acknowledging that the "Hmong came from the Asian world, the Asia area," she emphasized "Hmong American" as her primary identity.[355] Despite this, Mylo struggled with understanding how applications and census data categorized her as "Asian American," casting doubt on the possibility of fully embodying her chosen identity.[356]

While Mylo disagreed with the term "Asian American" to describe her identity, others, like Xiong Lor, did not. He explained, "I define myself as Asian American because even though

---

[352] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[353] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[354] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[355] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[356] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.; The subjective meanings that align or cut against these official categories are just as important. Asians are the most diverse race and are typically divided into six categories: Oceanian/Pacific Islander, Southern Asian, Eastern Asian, Central Asian, Southwest Asian, and Southeast Asian (including the Hmong). In July 2019, the total population of Asian was 4,586,799,898 or roughly 60 percent of the total world population. In April 2021, it was reported that Asian Americans were the fastest growing racial and ethnic group in the U.S. with the total population roughly equaling 22 million. Six groups accounted for approximately 85 percent of the total Asian population in the U.S. including Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese. The Hmong and Laotian each accounted for one percent of the total Asian population in the U.S. Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key Facts about Asian Origin Groups in the U.S." *Pew Research* (April 29, 2021): https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/ and "Asian Population," https://web.archive.org/web/20190721211812/https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/asia-population/

I was born in Laos, I grew 80 or 90 percent of my time over here… So, everything else I couldn't tell you, the places I was, I couldn't tell you, I was too young."[357] When asked to elaborate what it meant to be Asian American, Xiong concretely declared, "It means that I'm an Asian because I was born in Laos and I'm an America because I was raised over here. And what you call at an early age, I was brought over here at an early age, so I grew up over here. So, I consider myself as Asian American."[358]

Similarly to Mylo, Xiong admitted to not knowing much about Hmong culture, but attributed his lack of knowledge on Hmong culture to his parents converting to Christianity when they first arrived to the U.S. Xiong did not provide a reasoning as to why his parents converted, but he did admit that they did not practice much of the Hmong culture. He casually stated, "He [Xiong's father] didn't really teach us those [Hmong customs] because he wanted us to learn the Christian way. So, I'm not really that familiar with the cultural Hmong way."[359] While some Hmong refugee children and second-generation Hmong Americans struggled with not understanding their cultural background, Xiong appeared comfortable in not actively learning more customs and traditions. While he does attend large cultural events, like the Hmong New Year, he does not participate in other cultural practices. In fact, he seemed relieved that his family converted to Christianity. He explained, “I’m kind of glad my parents converted to Christianity because the old monoculture way is a lot of stuff to learn, ... And I think that’s the part where a lot of the young generation says that’s just too hard to do.”[360]

---

[357] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018 in Hickory.

[358] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018. Though coined by activists in the 1960s to consolidate political influence, the term "Asian American" has faced criticism for homogenizing a vastly diverse population, predominantly spotlighting East Asians while neglecting the needs of specific ethnic subgroups. This oversimplification has hindered targeted policy interventions for communities within the broader Asian American spectrum, exacerbating profound disparities in income, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. Despite efforts to broaden inclusivity through the label "Asian American and Pacific Islander" (AAPI) in the 1980s and '90s, this expansion has also sparked debate. Even though the US government disaggregated data for Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in 1997, remnants of the umbrella category persist, reflecting ongoing tensions and complexities within the AAPI community. Li Zhou, "The inadequacy of the term 'Asian American,'" *Vox*, May 5, 2021, https://www.vox.com/identities/22380197/asian-american-pacific-islander-aapi-heritage-anti-asian-hate-attacks and Connie Hanzhang Jin, "6 Charts That Dismantle The Trope Of Asian Americans As A Model Minority," *NPR*, May 25, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/999874296/6-charts-that-dismantle-the-trope-of-asian-americans-as-a-model-minority.

[359] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018

While Xiong Lor seemed at peace with distancing himself from his cultural background, others were not. Mai Yang, in recounting her own childhood, expressed the internal struggle of being in a “tug-of-war” with her identity as Hmong American. Another factor contributing to her internal identity struggle was the U.S. school system’s oversight of her cultural history. She declared with some frustration, “the history classes here in North Carolina, in high school and middle school and elementary school, they don’t talk about them [the Hmong] at all. They [the U.S. schools] didn’t talk about how we [the Hmong] came to the United States. They didn’t talk about the Secret War of Laos. I remember in high school, there [were] two paragraphs on the Vietnam War that we read in history class.”[361]

After enrolling in college, Mai devoted her extra time to learn about the Hmong, as she contended with her identity, recollected on her upbringing, and contemplated the uncertainties of her future. Reflecting on this transformative college experience, she remarked, “I started…self-reflecting and figuring out for myself…who are the Hmong people? How did we end up here in the United States…what’s our story?”[362] During her research on her cultural background and history, Mai realized “how wonderful my community was, how wonderful my ancestors were, how resilient the Hmong people in the Hmong community were…”[363] For Mai, her research ignited "a light bulb [that] went off in me…I just didn't know growing up."[364] When Mai finally did understand her family's struggles and background, she was able to "fully embrace the Hmong culture" and was able to "move forward as a person."[365] She concluded, "when I became more confident in my background, my heritage, my culture, that propelled me to be comfortable in who I am."[366]

---

[360] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018

[361] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023. For discussions on the silences of race in American education, please see: Angelina E. Castagno, “I Don’t Want to Hear That!: Legitimating Whiteness through Silence in Schools,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3: 314-333 and Jorge P. Osterling and Shelley D. Wong, “Dangerous Discourses and Uncomfortable Silences,” *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 3-16.

[362] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[363] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

Despite Mai's journey of self-acceptance and healing from the misunderstandings and misrepresentations surrounding her parents and her Hmong upbringing, the challenges persisted for other second-generation Hmong Americans. For Mylo the unspoken "racial othering" coming from the general public highlighted the ongoing struggles she experienced in understanding her place in the make-up of America.[367] Drawing a parallel with the experiences of Italian and Irish descendants, she questioned "is there such a thing that Americans are fully Americans? Like fully 100 percent white?" Expanding on her contemplation of whether immigrants or refugees can ever truly escape a sense of prejudice while living in the U.S., Mylo articulated, "every time when I encounter[ed] a situation where I felt like I'm unwanted…[like in a] room full of white people…even though it's not conveyed…verbally, you can feel it."[368]

Gender roles added another layer of complexity as Mylo grappled with her cultural identity and with the traditional and patriarchal structure of Hmong traditions. Elucidating this struggle, Mylo said, "You always obey your husband, you always listen, and you never talk back…being a mom, woman, it's very hard. It's not simple."[369] In Hmong culture, it was customary and expected for the aging parents of the eldest son to reside with their son and daughter-in-law once he married. Additionally, when the parents of Hmong children pass away, tradition dictates that the eldest son inherited the family's assets. Mylo, expressing deep care for her parents, wished for them to live with her or one of her sisters, believing that they would care more for her parents than her brother. However, she acknowledged the ingrained cultural norms that eliminated that possibility, stating, with a tinge of resentment and frustration in her voice, "because he's [her brother] the son…my parents live with him because he's the only son…my parents will never come and live with just me…or any of my sisters…and my brother will always end up…having all of their assets and stuff."[370] While reminiscing on her childhood and navigating the complex dynamics and family relations of Hmong culture, Mylo said that "he [her father] loved my brother a lot more, he's given my brother a lot more, and my brother had a lot more opportunities than we did, the daughters."[371] However, reflecting on these tensions between her and her siblings affirmed their enduring love for their father, asserting, "my brother does love my parents, but he doesn't show it like we do."[372]

---

[364] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[365] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[366] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[367] Paul Spickard, "Mapping Race: Multicultural People and Racial Category Constructions in the United States and Britain," *Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration, and Diaspora* 15, no. 2 (June 21, 2010): 107-119.

[368] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[369] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Mai Yang and Yer Lee, both second-generation Hmong American women, agreed with Mylo's experiences and both described the Hmong culture as "patriarchal."[373] Pang Vang would disagree with Mai, Yer, and Mylo's assessment of Hmong women being valued less than men. He firmly explained that while men "hold family lines," the "women control the traditions" and are the "spiritual centers" of the Hmong culture who often have to remind the men of when certain celebrations should take place and how those practices are performed.[374] He elaborated to say that a lot of the Hmong culture has been "misinterpreted and mistranslated in western terms" which has caused some tension between first- and second-generation Hmong Americans. [375] Kay Ying Lo, a Hmong refugee who found work as a translator for a local North Carolina school system, would agree with Pang. She understood that her husband's role was in the Hmong community was to "have the bigger voice," but she still had agency within her community.[376]

---

[370] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[371] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[372] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[373] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023 and Yer Lee (second-generation Hmong American), interviewed by author, May 17, 2023.

A source of conflict for some Hmong women, such as Yer Lee, was the Hmong "bride price," a customary practice in which the groom's family presented gifts or payment to the bride's family.[377] For Yer, the bride price was an example of women being viewed as property who can be bought.[378] In the U.S., the concept of the bride price is often criticized as a commodification of women. Traditionally, however, the terminology of "buying" or "getting" a wife was not viewed as "buying" a woman but rather a series of exchanges to form alliances between clans.[379] Pang disagreed with Yer's assessment and explained that the groom's family gave money to the bride's family to thank the bride's mother for her labor in raising a daughter.[380] While part of the bride price was used to compensate the bride's family for their labor in their daughter's upbringing, it was also used to bind a woman to her husband and his familial lineage and included the rights to her labor, sexuality, children (especially the boys), and the assets she brought into the marriage.[381] Although women were tied to their husband's family through the bride price, she was free to return to her natal home if she was unhappy in the marriage. Returning to her home was often viewed as a first step in divorce. Proceeding with divorce was rare as the husband would have to forfeit the bride price and possibly condemn him to a life of bachelorhood unless he could afford to pay for another bride. According to some scholars, the bride price was traditionally used as a form of protection to ensure their daughter's welfare was not entirely dependent on her husband.[382]

---

[374] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[375] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

[376] Kay Ying Lo, interview by Touger Vang, February 24, 2018 in Newton, North Carolina, transcript Catawba County Library, the Historical Society of Catawba County, and North Carolina Digital Heritage Center, available online https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106795?ln=en

[377] Yer Lee, May 17, 2023. Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul: Gender and the Cycle of Life in a Hmong Village,* (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2003): 169-170.

[378] Yer Lee, May 17, 2023.

[379] Instead of using the term "bride price," some Hmong in the U.S., have started to use the term "nurturing charge" to avoid the notion that women are bought and sold. Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul*, 169-170.

[380] Pang Vang, November 9, 2023.

Beyond the impact of gender roles, the birth order of Hmong children wielded significant influence within the culture, often leading to older children receiving more opportunities than their younger siblings. For example, Mai Yang, as the eldest in her family, who had to assume domestic responsibilities in her mother's absence also had the opportunity to attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), ultimately earning her bachelor's degree in social work. While Mai's younger siblings were also able to attend college, not all Hmong children were as fortunate.

The commitment to success within the Hmong community, went beyond the individual family units to include the collective community and provide financial support when available. Timmy Xiong illustrated this communal dedication, highlighting his father's role in establishing the Xiong Family Union. This organization, as Timmy described, was "a Hmong organization…[which] help[ed] award scholarship money to students who have graduated [high school and] encouraged them to achieve success beyond their goals."[383] Timmy elaborated:

---

[381] Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul*, 169-170.
[382] Patricia V. Symonds, *Calling in the Soul*, 169-170.
[383] Timmy Xiong, May 19, 2018.

> The Xiong organization helps those [high school] students who have graduated with financial aid. We [the Hmong] want them [younger Hmong students] to pursue higher education instead of just giving up on learning and entering the workforce. We [the older Hmong generations] want to push them [the younger generation] to go higher and higher so they graduate with their masters' degree, so they don't quit school, so they will persist. No matter how difficult, they must keep going. We help to take care of some of their financial needs through scholarship so that they can achieve and surpass their goals.[384]

While Timmy and his father dedicated themselves to supporting the younger Hmong generations in their educational pursuits, and Mai, as one of the eldest in her family, benefited from parental support to attend UNC, not all Hmong children shared the same fortunate circumstances. In contrast, Mylo Lor's family faced financial constraints and she was not able to rely on parental support for her education. Being one of seven children and recognizing the unfortunate reality of her parents being unlikely to financially assist her in pursuing higher education, Mylo decided to take control of her own future, in a way she best thought. Boldly defying her parents' wishes, Mylo ran away with her then-boyfriend, his father, and his uncle from Wisconsin to North Carolina. She was thirteen. The weight of upholding her family's name and expectations proved overwhelming, prompting her to marry her eighteen-year-old boyfriend, a recent high school graduate. Mylo revealed, "I felt a lot of it was because we came from a big family. We were poor…it was the only way out…and to have some sort of freedom."[385] Mylo perceived marrying young as more acceptable in the context of her world, unlike the standards of today.[386] Marriage ages vary widely among the Hmong community, with individuals as young as

---

[384] Timmy Xiong, May 19, 2018.

[385] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[386] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

14 marrying in traditional Hmong villages in Laos, while those residing in Western countries often wait until their late twenties to wed.[387]

Mylo's boyfriend, his father, and his uncle orchestrated their departure one afternoon, embarking on a drive to Morganton, North Carolina, and despite a fleeting moment of doubt, Mylo resolved to continue her journey south. She vividly recalled the intense anger her father harbored upon discovering her departure, saying, "my dad was very, very mad at me… and it took him three days and he finally called me."[388] When Mylo and her father did speak, he urged her to return home, asserting that he did not "care about [his] name…the community…or what the Hmong community" thought.[389] Despite her father's guarantees of welcoming Mylo back home and expressing that he was primarily concerned about her safety, Mylo perceived her father's reassurances as an attempt to protect the future marriage prospects of her sisters. Contradicting an early statement, Mylo admitted that even marrying another Hmong at thirteen was frowned upon in her community. Leaving her family at a young age and moving across the country, not only branded Mylo with the identity marker of a "flight risk," suggesting potential for abandoning her family again, it also carried implications for her sisters, potentially marking them as immoral women.[390] Mylo elucidated this perspective, stating that within the Hmong community, the sentiment would be “well…the older sister ran away already, so that means that…if it happens to her, it will happen to the younger siblings.”[391]

---

[387] G.Y. Lee and Nicolas Tapp, *Culture and Customs of the Hmong* (Santa Barbara: California: Greenwood, 2010): 166-168. Marriages among the Hmong community usually occurred in several ways including: arranged marriages orchestrated by families; mutual consent, where couples sought approval from their parents; elopement, where the couple ran away together; "bride capture," where the groom and his friends physically took the woman; and forced marriages, typically prompted by pregnancy, as well as unions for widows and divorcees.[387] In general, however, the majority of Hmong marriages stem from courtship and mutual affection between the individuals involved, typically approved by parents. Regardless of how the marriage took place, Hmong always marry someone from another clan.

[388] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[389] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

[390] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Mylo, in general, did not regret leaving her family and moving to another state so young, viewing the experience as a positive one that made her “a lot stronger” and steered her towards better decision-making. Reflective of her American identity and independence, she emphasized, “wanting to strive to do better because all I have is myself.”[392] Interestingly, Mylo’s eldest daughter, Serena, held a more direct and critical opinion about her mother’s decision to run away at thirteen. Mylo chose to share the story with Serena when she was around the same age. She recounted, “I felt like that was the appropriate time to tell her [daughter, Serena] because she was 13 and she looked at me and said, ‘Mom, you’re so stupid. Who gets married at 13?’”[393]

After moving to North Carolina, Mylo finished her high school education from Freedom High School in Morganton. She continued her education at Western Piedmont Community College for a few years before transferring to Lenoir Rhyne University to complete her bachelor’s degree. Although she enrolled in a master’s program in business administration, Mylo eventually chose to step back and prioritize raising her young children, with a firm commitment to return and complete her MBA.[394]

Mylo completing her bachelor’s degree was a formidable challenge. At the time, her husband’s second-shift job overlapped with some of her class times, posing a logistical hurdle. Fortunately for Mylo, most of her professors demonstrated understanding and accommodated her by allowing Mylo to bring her children to class. Recalling those moments, she described her daughters sitting outside the classroom with snacks and coloring books. On one occasion, Mylo had to bring her children during an exam, and was nervous to ask her professor to watch them. She shared, “That was the hardest thing for me. I just recall taking an exam, and I said, I don’t have anybody to care [for] my kids, but my two daughters are with me, and the only way I can make it to the exam is that you [the college professor] [had given] me permission.”[395] Despite the difficulty of making such requests, Mylo expressed gratitude for the constant support she received.[396] Mylo graduated with her bachelor’s degree, but did not complete it in the conventional four-year timeframe, taking seven years. Even so she asserted that the additional time fueled her ambition, stating, “[the college coursework] made me want it more. It made me more ambitious to work harder because I had them [her daughters].”[397] Elaborating on her motivation, Mylo emphasized that her daughters were the driving force behind her “strive to be better;” a philosophy that continues to shape her life.[398]

---

[391] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[392] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[393] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[394] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

In addition to more opportunities, older children within Hmong families also had more responsibilities. For instance, despite not being the eldest in her immediate family, when Mylo married her husband, who is the eldest son in his family, she assumed the role of the eldest daughter in her husband’s family, making it her responsibility to care for her in-laws. While Mylo was not tasked with caring for her own parents, she was, as customary in Hmong culture, responsible for caring for her husband’s parents. Placing aging parents in care facilities or assisted living was deemed disrespectful and unappreciative of their hard work to “get me [to where] I’m at.”[399] However, juggling the responsibilities of being a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law was challenging. Mylo acknowledged, “being a mom, daughter-in-law, the burden is so heavy and you want to make everything right and you want to make sure that everybody is taken care of and you tend to forget to take care of yourself.”[400]

---

[395] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[396] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[397] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[398] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[399] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Even though Mylo understood the customs and traditions of life in Laos, she disagreed with certain Hmong practices and has no intention of continuing the customs she deemed unfavorable or discriminatory towards her daughters. She explained that she “would love to carry some traditions but doesn’t want to carry on all the traditions like the son receiving assets and feeling like her daughters are less important than her sons.”[401] Mylo, having experienced feeling less worthy than her brother, was determined not to pass on the same sentiments to her daughters. Staunchly expressing her disagreement, Mylo emphasized that “sons are value[d] more than the daughters.”[402] Sharing a phrase her mother ingrained in Mylo, “if you’re a daughter, you don’t mean a lot to them [the parents] because…you’re not worth more.”[403] In present day, Mylo adamantly believed that her daughters should not feel inferior to her sons, passionately saying, “I love all four of my kids equally and I pray…that I’m good to all of them no matter how their life turns out.”[404]

In contrast to her parents’ and in-laws’ generation, Mylo emphatically rejects the notion that it is her children’s responsibility to care for her and her husband as they age.[405] Over the years, Mylo has recognized her efforts in caring for her in-laws while striving to be the best daughter in-law, but has firmly concluded that the responsibility should “not just [be] on me.”[406]

---

[400] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[401] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[402] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[403] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[404] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[405] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[406] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.

Despite her disagreement with this division of labor, she understood that "in Thailand, or in Laos, growing up…that's just how life is" according to her mom.[407] Elaborating on this perspective, she expressed a strong aversion to "put[ting] the pressure on them [her sons]…to take care of me when I get old."[408] While Mylo wished for her sons to remain part of her life and to love her as she ages, she does not want to "put the pressure [of] knowing that one day if something was to happen to me that it's their responsibility."[409]

The Hmong language is one Hmong characteristic Mylo and Mai both strive to pass onto their children, although both women have expressed some challenges with teaching their children the language. Mylo admitted that she was sterner in practicing with her older daughters than her sons giving a brief explanation that "it's just easier now to speak English to them."[410] While Mylo's daughters know Hmong and her sons know a few words, she wanted them to keep practicing the language because she "felt like it was important" and she hoped her kids continue with the tradition as well.[411] Mai expressed a similar sentiment about helping her children "feel confident about speaking Hmong because right now their preferred language is English."[412] Similar to Mylo, Mai "would like them [her children] to learn how to speak Hmong because I feel like that's part of the culture."[413] While they acknowledged the challenges of maintaining Hmong language proficiency when English was more convenient, both mothers remained committed to instilling cultural pride and traditions, even if they selectively disagree with other customs of the culture. Mai's daughter appears to proudly embrace her Hmong heritage, expressing to Mai that being Hmong is "cool."[414] Watching Hmong-American gymnast Suni Lee win the gold medal in the all-around competition at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics seemed to have ignited the pride Mai's daughter feels in being Hmong today.[415]

---

[407] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[408] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[409] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[410] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[411] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018.
[412] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[413] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

Another cultural tradition many young Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans hope their children continue to practice is the Hmong New Year celebration. The Hmong New Year is a festive and lively celebration that marks the end of the harvest season. Traditionally, the New Year celebration was held in the fall, after harvest, but was based on the moon cycle. Now, in the U.S., the Hmong New Year celebration falls over the weekend of Thanksgiving to ensure those who want to attend can take the time off from work. Regardless, the festival features traditional Hmong food, performances, and the formal courting practice of ball throwing.[416] Even the Hmong who are practicing Christians still attend the New Year celebration and hope future generations continue to attend. Xiong Lor, whose family converted to Christianity, has tried to instill in his children the importance of the New Year and urged them "to keep this [the New Year celebration] going because this is one part of our tradition that has been carrying on through generations and generations."[417] Xiong recognized that the New Year celebration is evolving to accommodate the younger generations, but the core of the festival remains the same. As he proudly declared, "Even though times change and people's mentality changes when they're adding stuff to it…but the thing behind it is still important to us in our culture, which is celebrating our thanks for the things that we've been given all year."[418] Mai Yang illuminated similar pride. She described the Hmong New Year as a time where the Hmong can "wear their beautiful clothes, come together and see each other."[419] She succinctly summarized what the New Year means to her when she stated, "there's these colors, these smells, these sounds that only being Hmong you can really, really understand and see."[420] For Mai, the New Year celebration represented the beauty of being Hmong.

---

[414] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[415] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the 2020 Olympics by a year. Although the Olympics occurred in 2021, it is still referred to as the 2020 Olympics. This is discussed further in the epilogue.

[416] Hmong ball throwing is a traditional cultural ritual that involves participants tossing a ball back and forth while performing intricate dance-like movements, symbolizing unity, harmony, and community spirit. More information can be found in Chapter 3.

[417] Xiong Lor, July 20, 2018.

Mai Yang, recognizing her own fortune of self-discovery, deeply empathized with the struggles many Hmong, specifically young women and girls, faced in understanding their background, identity, and navigating American culture. Motivated by this awareness, she pondered how to improve the lives of others grappling with their cultural heritage. Deciding to pursue a career in social work, Mai articulated her aspiration to "impact not only…the Hmong community, but also serve other communities because we're all tied and connected."[421] One ambition of Mai's is to help the North Carolina Hmong community heal and overcome the trauma embedded within their collective memories which still affects the Hmong community today.

In a 2011 Wisconsin mental health assessment, Hmong participants living in the Eau Claire area displayed a blurred understanding of mental health, often intertwining psychological and social issues. Most participants in the focus groups discussed a lack of understanding regarding the concepts of mental health and illness. They highlighted a significant divergence between Western perspectives and traditional Hmong beliefs. Notably, the Hmong language lacks equivalent terms for psychological and psychiatric issues, and mental disorders were not recognized within Hmong cultural frameworks. Even among educated and acculturated Hmong individuals, uncertainty persisted regarding the definition of mental health and illness, as well as the identification of problematic symptoms. There was genuine interest among participants in learning about psychiatric perspectives on symptoms and treatment. Participants acknowledged a general reluctance, especially among men, to disclose emotional difficulties due to societal stigma. According to this community needs assessment, this reluctance was attributed to a desire to maintain invisibility to avoid derogatory labels associated with mental illness. Historical and cultural norms, reinforced by contemporary attitudes, further discouraged open discussion of mental health issues.[422]

---

[418] Timmy Xiong, May 19, 2018.
[419] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[420] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[421] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

Pang Vang highlighted the traditional Hmong approach to mental health in Laos, noting a stigma while emphasizing their spiritual connection to the world. Severe conditions, he explained, might lead to individuals being sent to live with the monks, but by and large, mental health issues did not exist.[423] Mai Yang provided more nuance to Pang's perspective on mental health within the Hmong community. While agreeing with Pang that the Hmong understanding of mental health is complex and influenced by spirituality, culture, and language, Mai highlighted the existing stigma around the topic. She remarked, "people don't want to talk about it. They don't want to address it…not even think of that."[424] While Mai believed that the older Hmong community suffered from a stigma surrounding mental health, she also attributed language to being a barrier. She explained, "[there's] not really the language, the words in the

---

[422] Ann Futterman Collier, Martha Munger, Yong Kay Moua, "Hmong Mental Health Needs Assessment: A Community-Based Partnership," *Community Psychology* 49, no. 12 (April 26, 2011): 73-86.

[423] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[424] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

Hmong language to describe these things [mental health issues]."[425] Open conversations with her parents have even proved difficult as she reflected on previous interactions, "When I talk to my parents about it, it's really hard to find verbiage in the Hmong language to use to describe these… mental health challenges that we see."[426]

A story about Lia Lee, a young child of Hmong refugees residing in California in the 1980s provides further explanation to Pang and Mai's claims. Lia suffered from severe seizures from a young age and was diagnosed with epilepsy. A major obstacle the Lees faced was the language barrier as medical terminology often lacked direct translations in the Hmong language, resulting in lengthier and abstract explanations. For example, epilepsy as translated in the Hmong language is "the spirit catches you and you fall down."[427] Furthermore, many medical terms lacked equivalents in the Hmong languages, making communication challenging even with a translator present.[428] Despite these challenges, Mai expressed optimism for the future, remarking, "The more we talk about it, the more we address it, the more awareness we bring to it, the more people will begin to feel comfortable."[429] Mai acknowledged the evolving discussions around issues related to mental health noting that while there may not be specific Hmong words for certain issues, people are becoming comfortable using a "wrong word" to describe mental health or to use "the English language to describe it…to really tackle the issue, tackle the problem."[430]

---

[425] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[426] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[427] Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997): 20-21.

[428] Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 20-21.

[429] Mai Yang, 8, 2023.

[430] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023. By "wrong word" Mai means a word that would not typically be used in the Hmong language to describe the issue.

In addition to the existing negative stigma surrounding mental health and the language barriers, Mai highlighted how in Hmong culture, spirituality, and religion further complicate discussions and progress in treating mental health.[431] She explained, "in the Hmong community, religion is very tied to culture" emphasizing that "things we might think [of] as culture, might be tied to religion."[432] Specifically referencing shamanism, a spiritual practice within Hmong culture involving intermediaries between the spiritual and physical realms, Mai pointed out that "another compounding challenge [to address alongside mental health] is that when a person starts going through the rites of passage to become a shaman, that could be misinterpreted as mental illness."[433] In Hmong culture, epilepsy and other forms of mental illness can be perceived as a spiritual matter, where they believe that a "captured soul" must be called home.[434] This belief holds both caution and reverence. For example, the parents of Lia Lee, the young daughter with epilepsy, acknowledged the potential danger of repeated seizures, but they also viewed the illness with pride, as those with epilepsy or other mental health illness could potentially become shamans. For the Lees, and the Hmong more broadly, seizures could be viewed as necessary to facilitate a spiritual trance.[435]

When a Hmong individual becomes a shaman, they undergo a transformative process that often includes a spiritual calling, initiation rituals, and training under an experienced shaman. The aspiring shaman may experience visions or dreams believed to be the messages from the spirit world, prompting them to accept the shamanic calling. Initiation ceremonies involve rituals to connect with ancestral spirits and receive blessings, marking the official entry into shamanic practice. The shaman-in-training then learns traditional chants, rituals, and healing methods from an experienced mentor, acquiring the knowledge necessary to perform spiritual ceremonies, diagnose illnesses, and communicate with the spirit realm.[436] Mai strongly believed in shamanism as her mother was a practicing shaman, however, she acknowledged a "gray area" in the transformative process of becoming a shaman, stating that it "could be the reverse where it could be a mental illness."[437] Instead, she noted that some Hmong individuals view signs of mental illness as part of the shamanistic "process that's happening for the individual," highlighting the complex intersection between cultural beliefs and mental health within the Hmong community. Mai explained that as shamans go through the rite of passage "they're going to be hearing things, they're going to be feeling things that are very similar to somebody who may have a mental illness, who may be encountering mental challenges."[438] While stigma, language, and spirituality complicate discussion of mental health, it is important to Mai and others to "start talking about it [mental health] and bring awareness to it" and although "it might not solve everything…we [Mai and other advocates] could start at it little by little, one step at a time."[439]

---

[431] Deborah Helsel, "Paper Spirits and Flower Sacrifices: Hmong Shamans in the 21st Century," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 30, no. 2 (2019): 132-136. See also, Jim McSilver and Sarita Siegel, *The Split Horn: The Life of a Hmong Shaman in America*, Collective Eye, 2002.

[432] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[433] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

[434] Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 20-21.

[435] Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, 20-21.

The second-generation of Hmong Americans, though spared directly from experiencing the traumas of the Secret War, refugee camps, and financial survival upon arrival in the United States, still found themselves struggling with navigating between the Hmong community and American society. Intergenerational trauma still manifested among young Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans as they consistently faced challenges related to identity, understanding their cultural and historical roots, and integrating into American society. While, Mai and Mylo felt disheartened that their parents did not share much about Hmong culture and history during their upbringing, they now understand the reasons behind it. For both families, and other second-generation Hmong refugees, economic survival took precedence. Unfortunately, this resulted in a loss of understanding their cultural identity. Alongside the inability to share their culture, Hmong refugees grappled with processing the trauma of forced displacement and witnessing loved ones perish or being left behind. Even if they did not talk about it, the memories remained. Despite Mai and Mylo being largely unaware of their families' forced displacement, the enduring struggles were deeply felt. Regardless both Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans are "proud of being Hmong."[440]

---

[436] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[437] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.
[438] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.
[439] Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023.

---

[440] Mylo Lor, July 12, 2018; Mai Yang, December, 8, 2023; Kay Ying Lo, February 24, 2018.

CHAPTER VI: EPILOGUE

Perhaps I will not destroy the Hmong Wall, but I already have plans to climb it and break off a piece to bring back to my parents. I'll say to them proudly, "This is how much you were feared. A powerful emperor and dynasty created this for you and me. Not for Attila the Hun, Alexander the Great, or Genghis Khan, but for you and me. I've brought this rock back to show you what you've already overcome and that, though history has not been kind to us, we have persevered against war, tragedy, and displacement."[441]

– "The Hmong Wall" (Excerpt)
By Vayoung Moua

Many Hmong children, including Mai Yang, a second-generation Hmong American, faced extraordinary responsibilities beyond their years, tasked with providing interpretation, translation, and caretaking duties for their families. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota and later relocating to North Carolina in the early 1990s, Mai found herself assuming a maternal role at a young age, sacrificing a traditional childhood to support her siblings and assist her parents, who worked long hours. This deprivation of a normal childhood and absence of her parents who were concerned with work contributed to symptoms of generational trauma including isolation and dissociating with her Hmong identity.[442] Like many college-aged students, Mai embarked on a journey of self-reflection and self-discovery, consciously dedicating her spare time to immersing herself in the study of her culture and family history. While Mai still has moments where symptoms of generational trauma surface, she understands her unique position in how she can help her community heal from the trauma of forced displacement.[443]

---

[441] Vayoung Moua, excerpt from the poem "The Hmong Wall," in *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans* ed. Mai Neng Moua (St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002): 77. In the 16th century, Ming dynasty sent two thousand garrison troops to defeat Hmong rebels, leading to the deaths of forty thousand Hmong. The Hmong fiercely resisted imperial control, prompting the Ming Dynasty to construct the Hmong Wall, a 10-foot-tall, 100-mile-long barrier fortified with military outposts. Sue Murphy Mote, *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004): 100.

[442] Cindy C. Sangalang and Cindy Vang, "Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Immigrant Minor Health*, June 19, 2017: 745-754.

[443] Mai Yang (second -generation Hmong American) interviewed by author, December 8, 2023.

After college and entering the workforce, Mai wanted to do more for the community, more specifically for the young women and girls who might still be struggling with understanding what it means to be Hmong. Over the last couple of decades, Mai wanted to show other girls and women how “cool” it was to be Hmong. She began her search to find other like-minded Hmong women who had the same passion. Eventually her path crossed with Yer Lee, a daughter of Hmong refugees whose parents were originally resettled in Pennsylvania before she and her family moved to North Carolina in the early 1990s with her uncle to become egg farmers. True to Hmong collectivism, the two women, Yer and Mai, formed a strong friendship, or as Mai defined it, a strong “sisterhood” over their shared passion.[444]

Mai Yang and Yer Lee were the co-founders of the organization, the North Carolina Hmong Women’s Association. During their formative college years, the two second-generation Hmong Americans noted a gap in the resources available for Hmong women. Although the two women are roughly the same age, they did not attend the same college. Mai graduated from the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill while Yer graduated from Wake Forest University, but through other local Hmong networks, the two women eventually found each other. Because of Mai’s and Yer’s dedication and passion, the two established their organization, the North Carolina Hmong Women’s Association and received their official non-profit 501(c)3 status in 2021. While still in its infancy, the Hmong women have developed a strong mission, vision, and initiatives for their organization.

---

[444] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023 and Yer Lee (second-generation Hmong American) interviewed by author, May 17, 2023. In the context of American feminism, “sisterhood” refers to the solidarity, support, and sense of kinship among women, based on shared experiences, struggles, and goals. It emphasizes the importance of women coming together to advocate for gender equality, challenge patriarchal structures, and empower each other politically, socially, and economically. Sisterhood in feminism promotes collaboration, mutual respect, and collective action to address issues such as discrimination, sexism, and gender-based oppression. Durba Mitra, “Sisterhood is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (July 1, 2023): 431-452 and Bell Hooks, “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women,” *Feminist Review* 23 (Summer 1986): 125-138.

Yer and Mai noted that there were a lot of nonprofit Hmong organizations in North Carolina, but that these organizations had primarily been led by Hmong men. Yer and Mai recognized that "there were a lot of challenges that us Hmong women face that are not being recognized…talked about…even discussed or anything like that…like we didn't have any issues."[445] Women like Mai and Yer faced challenges in navigating their identities as women, balancing between their Hmong heritage and American cultural influences. Hmong women had to balance gender-specific expectations between their Hmong identity and American culture while overcoming language barriers, obtaining higher education, and addressing issues related to socioeconomic disparities. Mai continued and explained that the first step in addressing the Hmong woman experience, is to establish a platform and to create an environment conducive to progress.[446] She elaborated and noted questions that the Hmong community need to contend with and answer to continue to uplift and support each other. These questions included: "How can we [the Hmong community generally] make it better? How can we find opportunities? How can we…really uplift our community [while] uplift[ing] the whole North Carolina community?"[447] Mai, Yer, and the other board members of the organization have established four primary objectives to focus on in the coming years to address these questions including: a mental health initiative, a community needs assessment, a mentorship program for young Hmong girls, and a culture and literacy initiative to help preserve Hmong traditions, customs, and language.[448]

---

[445] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[446] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[447] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[448] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

Mental health is the primary concern for Mai. Over the last two years, the non-profit organization has hosted a number of virtual mental health trainings and encouraged Hmong women, men, and children across the state and country to participate. In addition to these virtual trainings, the organization has branched out and started hosting workshops with invited speakers. In November 2023, the North Carolina Women's Association hosted a workshop on mental health with prominent Hmong scholar and counselor, Calvin Yang, a clinical psychologist who completed his medical training in Minnesota and California. His philosophy to mental healthcare and therapy is "to present authentically alongside you to build a strong therapeutic relationship to explore intersecting identities, past relationships, and life experiences that might impact your ability to grow toward growth-fostering connection with yourself, others, and the world."[449] Mai and the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association invited Dr. Yang to talk about "intergenerational trauma…and gender differences…and to focus on topics that haven't really been highlighted or talked about in our [Hmong] community openly."[450] Mai continued and explained the significance of having someone who is part of your culture and knows the history and trauma the Hmong have experienced who can speak on issues that have impacted the healing of the Hmong population in the U.S. She said, "I think for one, having someone who's up there who looks like you speaks like you has a shared experience of culture with you is very important because, I think in North Carolina specifically, we haven't really had that [opportunity]."[451]

Although Mai admitted and is appreciative that several local Hmong community members have been active in bringing light to the Hmong past, she believes that it is also important to be part of the narrative on the national stage. She said, “we have had events where we have speakers, but I think a lot of them have been community people who stepped in and say, ‘Hey, I'm going to be that,’ but really not like an expert in that field.”[452] For Mai, finding an expert in trauma and mental health who was also Hmong was essential. She explained that “finding an expert in the mental health field, it’s hard, but they exist…and just being able to bring that person, that individual in person to North Carolina and sharing that with the community, I think was, was very valuable.”[453] Mai stated that once Dr. Calvin Yang began talking, the audience in attendance was engaged, and after the workshop they asked how these conversations could continue. She said, “once he [Calvin Yang] started talking about it [trauma and mental health], I felt like there was a lot of engagement from the community wanting to learn more, wanting to engage.”[454]

---

[449] "Calvin Yang," Crossroads Institute, accessed January 23, 2024, https://crossroads-psych.com/calvin-yang-2/

[450] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

[451] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.

Reflecting on the November event, Mai asked herself, “How do we how do we continue these conversations and discussions? How do we get people more people out so that people are aware of it? How do we bridge the gap? Not just bridge the gap between our community and sharing it with the greater community so that there is a sense of collaboration so everyone can work together and kind of like bridge resources.”[455] Mai remains hopeful and believes Hmong refugees and second-generation Hmong Americans will begin to have more serious discussions on mental health. However, she did recognize that the Hmong who tend to be more open-minded about the discussion and more willing to engage are those “around my age who are younger professionals, younger families.”[456] She continued, “we have had a few older generations who come out to support as well, but I think that one of our missions moving forward is how do we connect to the older generation."[457] Acknowledging intergenerational gaps, cultural incongruences, communication barriers due to varying language proficiency, and familial conflicts stemming from differences in intergenerational social mobility, second-generation Hmong Americans appear to hope to bridge generational divides and reconnect with their Hmong heritage and family history through storytelling, sharing ancient proverbs, and fostering exploration of ethnic and cultural heritage within the community. While second-generation Hmong Americans may not conform to all traditional customs, they do seem to hold the utmost respect and admiration for their parents who fought and survived to find their way to the United States.

---

[452] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[453] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.
[454] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[455] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023
[456] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

The other initiative taking precedence this year for Mai and her organization is a community needs assessment, which is being completed in partnership with the Center for New North Carolinians (CNNC) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) and other partnering local non-profits. Mai explained that the community needs assessment is a pressing issue for the Hmong in North Carolina. She explained, "across the U. S. [especially in] California, Minnesota and Wisconsin… there's a lot of information. If you go to different databases out there…there's basically very little, if any, on the North Carolina Hmong population."[458] She elaborated, "you really can't find anything on North Carolina for the Hmong, and so we really feel that a community needs assessment is really needed because we need to really understand our community."[459]

---

[457] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

[458] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.

[459] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

Although the other initiatives of the organization, the mentorship program and cultural and literacy program, are lower on the priority list they still are of importance. Mai briefly explained the objectives of the two initiatives. First, the mentorship program is aimed to provide support to younger generation Hmong Americans on a variety of issues, big and small. The mentorship program was designed to help the younger generations with their college and university careers, their time in the workforce, and in self-discovery and loving their "Hmongness."[460] The last initiative, the cultural and literacy program, is intended to be a summer program for young Hmong children to learn about Hmong customs, practices, and how to speak the language.[461] An additional project that Yer is pursuing individually is a continuation of the Hmong oral history projects that have been completed across the state, both with Catawba County and at UNC-Chapel Hill. As the older generation of Hmong refugees pass away, Yer is wanting to "preserve the culture and memories of her elders"[462]

As Mai and Yer continue to develop programming for their non-profit organization, they have also deliberated on questions around expanding their network and promoting their initiatives. Mai explained that she and the other board members have asked themselves how they, as an organization, can get other Hmong "to come out and support our events" and to "share what's going on."[463] Mai is hopeful that the upcoming community needs assessment will provide a better direction to "move forward" and provide the support the North Carolina Hmong need. When asked if the organization is only targeted to North Carolina Hmong, she explained that the organization is open to anyone from across the country, both people who need support and allies of the Hmong.[464]

---

[460]Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.
[461] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023.
[462] Yer Lee, May 17, 2023.
[463] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

In concluding remarks, Mai was hopeful for the future of Hmong Americans as she believes more individuals are taking pride in their heritage. She emphasized that "Only recently, after they've [Hmong Americans] grown, been here for fifty years, and have worked to become professional do they understand how important and proud it is to be Hmong."[465] Mai then cited several Hmong professionals including world famous chefs who fuse "Hmong cuisine with an American spin" and U.S. Olympian and gold medalist gymnast, Suni Lee who inspired her daughter and her community when she came home as the all-around champion at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.[466] Suni Lee was the first Hmong American on the U.S. gymnastics team and her success at the Tokyo Olympics placed the Hmong culture on center stage. Not only did her Olympic campaign make her parents proud, it also made the global Hmong community proud. As her father stated, "I can't find the words to express how happy we are, how important that was to me and my family and to the whole Hmong community throughout the world."[467]

In recent years, Hmong cuisine has gained increased prominence on a national scale, with Hmong American chefs such as Yia Vang capturing widespread attention and acclaim, shining a spotlight on the rich and diverse culinary traditions of the Hmong community. Yia Vang was born in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand in 1984, where he spent his early years before resettling to the United States with his family in 1988. After earning a degree in communications from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse in 2010, he relocated to Minneapolis, Minnesota, securing employment as a dishwasher and line cook at a local restaurant. Despite familial expectations for a career in an office setting, Yia discovered a passion for culinary arts, motivated by a desire to honor his parents' sacrifices and share his Hmong heritage with a broader audience through food.[468]

---

[464] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

[465] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023

[466] Mai Yang, December 8, 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the 2020 Olympics by a year. Although the Olympics occurred in 2021, it is still referred to as the 2020 Olympics.

[467] John Lee in "'Happy Tears': Lee's gold sparks joy at home in Minnesota," *Associated Press*, July 29, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-gymnastics-sunisa-lee-sports-minnesota-f7cc30aa356b7c3a2cb8fe1e60b267b1

Viewing Hmong cuisine as a means of cultural preservation and community engagement, Yia Vang embraces a holistic approach, leveraging his surroundings to craft dishes that bridge cultures. Over the past decade, he has garnered national acclaim, appearing on Iron Chef in 2022 and becoming the first Hmong American to showcase Hmong cuisine at the Minneapolis State Fair. Yia was one of the founders of the critically acclaimed pop-up style restaurant, Union Hmong Kitchen (UHK) in Minneapolis. A pop-up restaurant is a temporary style restaurant that usually operates from a private home and during festivals. While UHK now has a permanent home in Graze Provisions and Libations in Minneapolis, the business resembles more of a food court type setting. Hoping to expand his business, Yia Vang wants to establish a more permanent and traditional sit-down style restaurant, Vinai, named after the refugee camp, is anticipated to launch in the spring of 2024. Yia Vang stands as a trailblazer among a new wave of restaurateurs and farmers dedicated to popularizing Hmong culture.[469]

---

[468] Noah Sheidlower, "Hmong cuisine and culture are having a moment in the US. We spoke with the restaurateurs and farmers driving innovation," *Business Insider*, July 16, 2023, https://www.businessinsider.com/hmong-cuisine-culture-philosophy-business-food-industry-renaissance-farming-agriculture-2023-6. Keith Uhlig, "Central Wisconsin native Yia Vang's trendy Union Hmong Kitchen lives up to all the hype," *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*, September 14, 2022, https://www.wisconsinrapidstribune.com/story/life/2022/09/14/yia-vangs-union-hmong-kitchen-twin-cities-lives-up-all-hype/8025367001/

Resettlement agencies, federal government offices, and other non-profit organizations have also continued to revolutionize refugee policies on resettlement and integration. Traditionally, refugee resettlement in the United States through the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) was primarily facilitated by refugee resettlement organizations, local nonprofits that collaborated with national counterparts as well as with government agencies such as the U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). These organizations provided essential support and programming to guide refugees through the resettlement process. Private sponsorship programs, in contrast, enable private individuals rather than resettlement agencies to sponsor and assist in the resettlement of refugees.[470]

Together, these different entities have partnered to form a consortium which contributed to the development of Welcome Corps. In January 2023, in partnership with the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and other national agencies, the consortium launched Welcome Corps, allowing everyday Americans to privately sponsor refugees through the USRAP without needing to partner with a non-profit or local resettlement agency. This new program is the first revival of U.S. refugee resettlement and integration policy since the 1980 Refugee Act.[471] In addition to Welcome Corps, where private individual U.S.

---

[469] Noah Sheidlower, "Hmong cuisine and culture are having a moment;" Yia Vang, "Hmong Food Isn't a Cuisine. It's a Philosophy," blog, July 6, 2021, https://blog.resy.com/2021/07/hmong-food-isnt-a-cuisine-its-a-philosophy/; and Khushbu Shah, "Finding Home in a Hmong Food Cart," *Food & Wine*, December 10, 2020, https://www.foodandwine.com/travel/restaurants/las-hmong-food-cart-laotian-food-la-vang-herr. There are restaurants in North Carolina who also serve Hmong cuisine, such as purple sticky rice and Hmong sausage, but they are often part of Laotian or Thai restaurants and do not solely serve Hmong food like Yia Vang aims to do with the opening of his restaurant.

[470] "About," Welcome Corps, accessed January 23, 2024, https://welcomecorps.org/about/

[471] "About," Welcome Corps, accessed January 23, 2024.

citizens can now sponsor refugees and aid with resettlement, the federal government also rolled out Welcome Corps on Campus (WCC) in July 2023. Like Welcome Corps, WCC, allows colleges and universities to sponsors refugee students who wish to pursue higher education while assisting in their long-term integration and pathway to citizenship.[472] Another program, Welcome Corps at Work, which will support refugee workers, is expected to be launched in 2024.[473]

The population of forcibly displaced persons continues to rise. By mid-2023, the number of displaced people worldwide was 110 million individuals, an increase from 108.4 people at the end of 2022.[474] This number includes internally displaced people, asylum seekers, refugees, and other individuals in need of international protection. During this six-month, time from the end of 2022 to the half way point of 2023, the number of refugees increased from 35.3 to 36.4 million worldwide.[475] While war and persecution is one factor of forced displacement, climate crises have also contributed to the increasing number which is expected to continue rising.[476]

Since the 1980s, North Carolina has consistently ranked among the top states in refugee resettlement, standing out as a key destination for refugees seeking resettlement and integration on the eastern seaboard, second only to New York. North Carolina annually accepts roughly four percent, approximately three thousand people, of the total number of refugees admitted to the country. Most of these newcomers are resettled in Greensboro, the third largest city in the state, and other surrounding towns in Guilford County.[477] As the number of refugees increases, North Carolina can further improve its available resources and programing to foster a more inclusive and welcoming environment within the state.

---

[472] Welcome Corps on Campus will have their first cohort of students arriving for fall 2024. The first cohort will be for refugees who resided in Kenya and had already been referred to the United States Refugee Admission Program (USRAP). The 2025-2026 cohort will be for refugees residing in Kenya and Jordan. "Information for Refugee Students," Welcome Corps, accessed January 23, 2024, https://welcomecorps.org/campus/information-for-refugee-students/

[473] "About," Welcome Corps

[474] "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022," UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022; "Refugee Data Finder," UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/

[475] "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022" and "Refugee Data Finder."

[476] Lawrence Huang, "Climate Migration 101: An Explainer," *Migration Policy Institute*, November 16, 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/climate-migration-101-explainer#:~:text=A%20thoroughly%20debunked%20but%20nonetheless,people%20will%20remain%20displaced%20forever.

While there have been several pieces of legislation related to refugees, asylum seekers, and humanitarian parolees much of these policies focus on the admittance of newcomers and not with providing sufficient support as they begin to establish their new lives in the U.S. Welcome Corps has become the first program to focus on integration through private sponsorships. Although it is still too early to see the successes and failures of the program, I am hopeful that this program will provide a "softer landing" for newcomers in their community. However, I worry the new policies are still not enough as less than one percent of the worldwide refugee population are ever resettled.[478] Most refugees live and die in camps. Additionally, with the burgeoning numbers of refugees and other displaced individuals, I worry the U.S. will continue to be slow in their response to global crises, and reactive rather than proactive in their future policies related to resettlement and integration. Time is simply a luxury the global community does not have.

---

[477] "Archives," Refugee Processing Center, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/

[478] "Resettlement," UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency, accessed January 23, 2024, https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/resettlement#:~:text=Resettlement%20is%20unique%20in%20that,refugees%20are%20resettled%20each%20year.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Blogs

Vang, Yia. “Hmong Food Isn’t a Cuisine. It’s a Philosophy.” July 6, 2021. https://blog.resy.com/2021/07/hmong-food-isnt-a-cuisine-its-a-philosophy/

Hmong Folklore and Contemporary Writings

“How the Hmong Clans Got Their Names.” *Myths, Legends, and Folk Tales from the Hmong of Laos: Dab Neeg Hmoob*, edited by Pa Chou Yang, Se Yang, and Charles Johnson. 57. St. Paul, Minnesota: Linguistics Department, Macalester University, 1992.

Moua, Vayoung. “The Hmong Wall.” In *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, edited by Mai Neng Moua. 77-78. St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002.

Thao, Law. “Hmong Oral Stories: Nuj Nplhaib thiab Ntxawm.” February 11, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgIQ2wHyj00

Thao Worra, Bryan. “The Last War Poem,” In *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, edited by Mai Neng Moua. 98-99. St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002.

“The Beginning of the World.” In *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam*, Livo, edited by Norma Livo and Dia Cha. 33. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991.

“Why the Hmong Live on the Mountains.” In *Folk Stories of the Hmong: Peoples of Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam*, Livo, edited by Norma Livo and Dia Cha. 57. Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1991.

Yang, Naly. “In Remembrance.” In *Bamboo Among the Oaks: Contemporary Writing by Hmong Americans*, edited by Mai Neng Moua. 187. St. Paul, Minnesota: Borealis Books, 2002.

Oral Histories

Author’s Interviews

Interviews were recorded and are in my possession.

Bruno, Ellen. Phone Interview. September 23, 2022.

Lee, Yer. Video Interview. May 17, 2023.

Vang, Pang. Video Interview. November 9, 2023.

Yang, Mai. Video Interview. December 8, 2023.

North Carolina Digital Heritage Center Interviews

Lo, Nao Chao. By Siobhan Loendorf. June 25, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106801?ln=en&viewer=iframe

Vang, Bee Chong Kao. By Houa Yang. June 25, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106799?ln=en

Xiong, Neng. By Houa Yang. June 25, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106800

Xiong, Timmy. By Houa Yang. May 19, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106796?ln=en.

Xiong, Yang Por. By Houa Yang. May 18, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en.

Yang, Chia and Choua Tong Xiong. By Touger Vang. June 25, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106794?ln=en

Yang, Nhia Thong. By Houa Yang. June 25, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106802?ln=en

Ying Lo, Kay. By Touger Vang. February 24, 2018. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/106795?ln=en

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Southern Oral History Program

Lee, Pai. By Emmanuel Lee. *Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*. June 25, 2018. https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28570/rec/3

Lor, Mylo. By Emmanuel Lee. *Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*. July 12, 2018. https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28259/rec/1

Lor, Xiong. By Emmanuel Lee. *Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*. July 20, 2018. https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/28280/rec/1.

Legal and Government Documents

Baiz, Richard C. "Office of Refugee Resettlement's (ORR) FY 1985 National Discretionary Activities Plan). Received by All County Welfare Directors, Department of Social Services. (Sacramento, California, March 6, 1985): https://www.cdss.ca.gov/lettersnotices/entres/getinfo/acin85/I-25-85.pdf

Gunderson, Steve. "State Department Outlines Resettlement Guidelines for Hmong Refugees," *Congressional Press Release*. (May 1998).

Kogan, Deborah and Mary Vencill. "An Evaluation of the Favorable Alternate Sites Project: Final Report." Sponsored by the Office of Refugee Resettlement and Berkley Planning Association (October 1984), https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED268201.pdf.

Rynearson, Ann, Thomas Gosebrink, and Barrie Gewanter. "Barriers to Censusing Southeast Asian Refugees, Final Joint Statistical Agreement 88-20. Sponsored by Center for Survey Methods Research (Bureau of the Census: Washington, DC, June 1990), https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/1990/adrm/ex90-10.pdf

United States. Congress. Refugee Act of 1980. Pub. L. No. 96-212, 94 Stat. 102.

United States. House of Representatives, One Hundred First Congress, First Session. "Orderly Departure Program and U.S. Policy Regarding Vietnamese Boat People: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary. June 28, 1989.

U.S. Comptroller General. *The Indochinese Exodus: A Humanitarian Dilemma*. April 24, 1979.

Vang, Lo. "Letter to Senator Alan Simpson from Lo Vang, a Hmong refugee from Laos." University of California at Irvine, Southeast Asian Archive. (July 29, 1987).

Material Culture

Vang Ka Yeng, "United Nations High Commission for Refugees Paperwork." *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102870?ln=en#?xywh=-983%2C0%2C8984%2C5099&cv=

Xiong, Neng. "Photograph of Neng Xiong's Uncle." *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102786?ln=en#?xywh=-8113%2C-1%2C23025%2C9359

Xiong, Tong. "Photograph of Tong Xiong in His Military Uniform Serving as a CIA Guerilla Combatant." *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102749?ln=en#?xywh=-5536%2C-1%2C16117%2C6551

Yang, Chia. “Embroidered Story Cloth with Animals.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102750?ln=en#?xywh=-1717%2C63%2C6610%2C2687

Yang, Chia. “Embroidered Story Cloth with Bull and Serpent Motifs.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102750?ln=en#?xywh=-1717%2C63%2C6610%2C2687

Yang, Chia. “Silver Bracelets.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102755?ln=en#?xywh=-114%2C-213%2C3759%2C1946

Yang, Houa. “Folk Tale Story Cloth.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102770?ln=en#?xywh=752%2C380%2C4106%2C1669

Ying Lo, Kay. “Embroidered Belts.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102817?ln=en#?xywh=0%2C-555%2C5010%2C3623

Ying Lo, Kay. “Photograph of Kay Ying Lo and her two young daughters in La Crosse, Wisconsin.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102762?ln=en#?xywh=-2445%2C-1%2C6738%2C2739

Ying Lo, Kay. “Picture of Hmong New Year, circa 2011.” *North Carolina Digital Heritage Center*. https://lib.digitalnc.org/record/102812?ln=en#?xywh=-1%2C-61%2C4165%2C3012&cv=

Newspapers

“405 Hmong Holdouts From Vietnam War Era Surrender in Laos.” *New York Times*. December 14, 2006.

Crossette, Barbara. “130,000 Refugees in Thailand Wait to Go Abroad.” *New York Times*. September 2, 1984.

Crossette, Barbara. “Thailand Pressing Ouster of Laotians.” *New York Times*. March 19, 1987.

Fernandez, Jennifer. “The culture broker: Touger Vang, a Hmong who has lived in the U.S. since he was 9, is trying to merge the best of his two worlds.” *Greensboro News & Record* March 24, 2009: https://greensboro.com/news/the-culture-broker/article_df7a6791-7955-53e7-bb8f-ceaab9ad0971.html#tncms-source=login

“‘Happy Tears’: Lee’s gold sparks joy at home in Minnesota.” *Associated Press*. July 29, 2021. https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-gymnastics-sunisa-lee-sports-minnesota-f7cc30aa356b7c3a2cb8fe1e60b267b1

“Hmong refugees in Thailand protest against repatriation to Laos.” *BBC Worldwide Limited.* July 6, 2005.

Lauerman, Connie. “Back to the Land.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 1, 1989. https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-10-01-8901180367-story.html

Montage, Renee. “Analysis: Several States Face Massive New Influx of Hmong Refugees.” *Morning Edition, NPR*. July 21, 2004.

Mydans, Seth. “Thailand: Hmong Sent Back to Laos.” *New York Times*. December 29, 2009.

“Refugee Relocation Effort: Indochinese Urged to Go East for New Homes, Jobs.” *Los Angeles Times*. December 8, 1986. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1986-12-08-mn-1865-story.html

Shah, Khushbu. “Finding Home in a Hmong Food Court.” *Food & Wine*. December 10, 2020. https://www.foodandwine.com/travel/restaurants/las-hmong-food-cart-laotian-food-la-vang-herr.

Sheildlower, Noah. “Hmong cuisine and culture are having a moment in the US. We speak with the restaurateurs and farmers driving innovation.” *Business Insider*. July 16, 2023. https://www.businessinsider.com/hmong-cuisine-culture-philosophy-business-food-industry-renaissance-farming-agriculture-2023-6.

Uhlig, Keith. “Central Wisconsin native Yia Vang’s trendy Union Hmong Kitchen lives up to all the hype.” *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*. September 14, 2022. https://www.wisconsinrapidstribune.com/story/life/2022/09/14/yia-vangs-union-hmong-kitchen-twin-cities-lives-up-all-hype/8025367001/

Weldon, Luci. “Bamboo Grows in Warrenton.” *The Warren Record*. (July 15, 2020): https://www.warrenrecord.com/news/article_c142920a-c698-11ea-b423-23308cc6b430.html.

Winter, Roger. “Hmong Pushed Back At Laos-Thai Border.” *New York Times*. June 28, 1985.

Online Resources

“About.” Welcome Corps. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://welcomecorps.org/about/

“Archives.” Refugee Processing Center. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://www.wrapsnet.org/archives/

“Asian Population.” https://web.archive.org/web/20190721211812/https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/asia-population/

“Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022.” UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022.

"Our History." Hmong Southeast Puavpheej. Accessed October 28, 2023. https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/about/

"Refugee Data Finder." UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/

"Top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas by Hmong population, 2019." *Pew Research Center*. April 29, 2021. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-hmong-population-2019/.

Secondary Sources

Books and Articles

Aarons, Victoria. *Holocaust Graphic Narratives: Generation, Trauma, and Memory*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Aarons, Victoria and Alan L. Berger. *Third Generation Holocaust Representation: Trauma, History, and Memory*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017.

Abdo, Diya. *American Refuge: True Stories of the Refugee Experience*. Lebanon, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2022.

Abu-Ghazaleh, Faida. *Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Material Cultural Artifacts*. El Paso, Texas: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2010.

Ahern, Jr. Thoma. *The Way We Do Things: Black Entry Operations Into North Vietnam, 1961-1964*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005.

Ahern, Jr., Thoma. *Undercover Armies: CIA and Surrogate Warfare in Laos*. Washington, DC: Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2006.

Allen Smalley, William, Chiaa Koua Vang, and Gnia Yee Yang. *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script.* Chicago, Illinois: Chicago University Press, 1990.

Alloush, Mohmmed, J. Edward Taylor, Anubhab Grupta, Ruben Irvan Rojas Valdes, and Ernesto Gonzalez-Estrada. "Economic Life in Refugee Camps." *World Development* 20 (2017): 1-14.

Alper, Joe. *Facilitating Health Communication with Immigrant, Refugee, and Migrant Populations through the use of Health Literacy and Community Engagement Strategies: Proceedings of a Workshop*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2017.

Anker, Deborah and MH Posner. “The Forty Year Crisis: A Legislative History of the Refugee Act of 1980.” *South Dakota Law Review* 19, no. 1 (1981): 9-89.

Annamalai, Aniyishai, editor. *Refugee Health Care: An Essential Medical Guide*. New York: Springer, 2014.

Ansari, Hibah. “Hmong women sold their embroidery in refugee camps for $1 apiece. The culture they documented is beyond value.” *Sahan Journal* (July 20, 2020). https://sahanjournal.com/arts/hmong-paj-ntaub-hmong-archives/

Arkenberg, R. “Hmong Story Cloths: Preserving Cultural Identity and Traditions through Art.” *School Arts* 107, no. 2 (2007): 32-33

Baird, Ian. “The Monks and the Hmong: The Special Relationship between the Chao Fa and the Tham Krabok Buddhist Temple in Saraburi Province Thailand.” In *Violent Buddhism: Buddhism and Militarism in Asia in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Vladimir Tikhonov and Torkel Brekke. London, UK: Routledge, 2013.

Banko, Lauren, Katarzyna Nowak, and Peter Gatrell. “What is refugee history, now.” *Journal of Global History*. (2022): 1-19.

Berestein Rojas, Leslie. “Gen 1.5: Where an immigrant generation first in.” *Southern California Public Radio* (March 21, 2012): https://archive.kpcc.org/blogs/multiamerican/2012/03/21/7963/what-is-a-1-5-where-an-immigrant-generation-fits-i/

Bodnar, John. *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985.

Brown Heinz, Carolyn. “The Hmong in Thailand.” In *Asian Cultural Traditions*, 91-115. Long Grove: Illinois: Waveland Press, 1999.

Budiman, Abby and Neil G. Ruiz. “Key Facts about Asian Origin Groups in the U.S.” *Pew Research* (April 29, 2021). https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-origin-groups-in-the-u-s/

Buley-Meissner, Mary Louise and Vincent K. Her. *Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society, 2012.

Casey, Evan and Deirdre Clemente. “Clothing the Contadini: Migration and Material Culture, 1890-1925.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2017): 5-24.

Castagno, Angelina E. “I Don’t Want to Hear That!: Legitimating Whiteness through Silence in Schools.” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2008): 314-333.

Castle, Timothy. *At War in the Shadow of Vietnam: U.S. Military Aid to the Royal Lao Government, 1955-1975*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

Cenzia Choy, Catherine. *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Chan, Sucheng, *Survivors: Cambodian Refugees in the United States*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Chan, Sucheng. *Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2006.

"Charting a Course to Rebuild and Strengthen the US Refugee Admissions Program." *Center for Migration Studies* (December 2020): 1-6.

Chu, Patricia. *Where I Have Never Been: Migration, Melancholia, and Memory in Asian American Narratives of Return*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2019.

Clinton Thompson, Larry. *Refugee Workers in the Indochina Exodus, 1975-1992*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2010.

Conboy, Kenneth and James Morrison. *Shadow War: The CIA's Secret War in Laos*. Boulder, Colorado: Paladin Press, 1995).

Court Robinson, W. *Terms of Refuge: The Indochinese Exodus and the International Response*. London, UK: Zed Books, 1998.

Courtois, Stéphane and Mark Kramer. *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repressions.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Darrow, Jessica. "Working It Out in Practice: Tensions Embedded in the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program Resolved through Implementation." In *Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics, and Humanitarian Governance*, edited by Adele Garnier, Liliana Lyra Jubilut, and Kristin Bergtora Sandvik. 93-117. New York: Berghahn Books, 2018.

Dench, Janet. "Ending the Nightmare: Speeding up Refugee Family Reunification." *Canadian Issues* (Spring 2006): 53-56.

Digilov, Yan and Yehuyda Sharim. "Refugee Realities: Between National Challenges and Local Responsibilities in Houston, Texas." *Rice Kinder: Institute for Urban Research*. Houston, Texas: 2018. https://kinder.rice.edu/research/refugee-realities-between-national-challenges-and-local-responsibilities-houston-tx.

Donato, Katharine and Elizabeth Ferris. "Refugee Integration in Canada, Europe, and the United States: Perspectives from Research." *ANNALS AAPSS* 690 (July 2020): 7-35.

Dudley, Sandra. *Materialising Exile: Material Culture and Embodied Experience among Karenni Refugees in Thailand*. New York: Berhahn Books, 2010.

Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997.

Fee, Molly. "Paper Integration: The Structural Constraints and Consequences of the US Refugee Resettlement Program." *Migration Studies* 7, no. 4 (2019): 477-95.

Foner, Nancy. *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2000.

Futterman Collier, Ann, Martha Munger, and Yong Kay Moua. "Hmong Mental Health Needs Assessment: A Community-Based Partnership." *Community Psychology* 49, no. 12 (April 26, 2011): 73-86.

Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla, editor. *History, Trauma, and Shame: Engaging the Past Through Second Generation Dialogue*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Haines, David. *Safe Haven?: A History of Refugees in America.* Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010.

Handlin, Oscar. *The Uprooted*. 2nd edition. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990.

Hamilton-Merritt. *Tragic Mountain: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret War for Laos, 1942-1992.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

Hanzhang Jin, Connie. "6 Charts That Dismantle The Trope Of Asian Americans As A Model Minority." *NPR*. (May 25, 2021). https://www.npr.org/2021/05/25/999874296/6-charts-that-dismantle-the-trope-of-asian-americans-as-a-model-minority.

Helsel, Deborah. "Paper Spirits and Flower Sacrifices: Hmong Shamans in the 21st Century." *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 30, no. 2 (2019): 132-136.

Her, Vincent. "Searching for Sources of Hmong Identity in Multicultural America." In *Hmong and American*. 31-46. Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012.

Hickner-Johnson, Corey. "Taking Care in the Digital Realm: Hmong Story Clothes and the Poverty of Interpretation on HmongEmboridery.org." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 4. (July 2016): 31-48.

Higham, John. *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955.

Ho Peche, Linda, Alex-Thai Dinh Vo, and Yuong Vu, editors. *Towards a Framework for Vietnamese American Studies: History, Community, and Memory*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003.

Hooks, Bell. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women." *Feminist Review* 23 (Summer 1986): 135-138.

Huang, Hao. "Speaking with Spirits: The Hmong *Ntoo Xeeb* New Year Ceremony." *Asian Folklore Studies* 63 (2004): 31-55.

Huang, Lawrence. "Climate Migration 101: An Explainer." *Migration Policy Institute*. November 16, 2023. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/climate-migration-101-explainer#:~:text=A%20thoroughly%20debunked%20but%20nonetheless,people%20will%20remain%20displaced%20forever.

Im, Hyojin and Laura ET Swan. "Capacity Building for Refugee Mental Health in Resettlement Implementation and Evaluation of Cross-Cultural Trauma-Informed Care Training." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 22, no. 5 (2020): 923-934.

Jensen, Geoffrey W. and Matthew M. Smit, editors. *Beyond the Quagmire: New Interpretations of the Vietnam War*. Denton, Texas: University of North Texas Press, 2019.

Keown-Bomar, Julie and Ka Vang. "Hmong Women, Family Assets, and Community Cultural Wealth." In *Claiming Place: On the Agency of Hmong Women*, edited by Chia Youyee Vang, Faith Nibbs, and Ma Vang. 117-143. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Kewin, Donald. "The Faltering U.S. Refugee Protection System: Legal and Policy Responses for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Others in Need of Protection." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 1-33.

Kraut, Alan M. *The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921*. 2nd edition. Wheeling, Illinois: Halan Davidson, 2001.

Lee, G.Y. and Nicholas Tapp. *Culture and Customs of the Hmong*. Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood, 2010.

Leary, William. "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974: Supporting the 'Secret War.'" *Studies in Intelligence*. (Winter 1999-2000): 1-31. https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/static/CIA-Air-Ops-Laos.pdf

Leary, William. *Perilous Missions: Civil Air Transport and CIA Covert Operations in Asia*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006.

Lipman, Jana. *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates*. Oakland, California: Oakland University Press, 2020.

Lunsford, Mackensy. “This is life’: In North Carolina Mountains, Hmong refugees grow rice, uphold food sovereignty.” *The Tennessean*. September 30, 2021. https://www.tennessean.com/in-depth/news/american-south/2021/09/30/lees-one-fortune-farm-nc-hmong-refugees-grow-rice-food/5712965001/

Madokoro, Laura. *Elusive Refuge: Chinese Migrants in the Cold War.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Magliveras, Simeon S. “Hmong Textiles, Symmetries, Perception, and Culture.” *Anthropology and Ontological Symmetry* 12, no. 11 (2020): 1829.

Mannik, Lynda. *Migration by Boat: Discourses of Trauma, Exclusion, and Survival*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2016.

Meng-Hsuan Yang, Dominic. *The Great Exodus from China: Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Modern Taiwan*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Mitra, Durba. “Sisterhood is X: On Feminist Solidarity Then and Now.” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (July 1, 2023): 431-452.

Mortland, Carol A. and Judy Ledgerwood. “Secondary Migration Among Southeast Asian Refugees in The United States.” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 16, no. 3-4 (1987): 291-326.

Mote Murphy, Sue. *Hmong and American: Stories of Transition to a Strange Land.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2004.

Ngai, Mae. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014.

Nibbs, Faith. “Belonging: The Resettlement Experiences of Hmong Refugees in Texas and Germany.” *Migration Policy Institute* (2014). https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/belonging-resettlement-experiences-hmong-refugees-texas-and-germany

Noble Wilford, John. “Carvings From Cherokee Script’s Dawn.” *New York Times*. (June 2009). https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/science/23cherokee.html?ref=science.

Osornprasop, Sutayut. “Amidst the Heat of the Cold War in Asia: Thailand and the America Secret War in Indochina (1960-1974).” *Cod War History* 7, no. 3 (2007): 349-371.

Osterling, Jorge P. and Shelley D. Wong. “Dangerous Discourses and Uncomfortable Silences.” *Journal of Praxis in Multicultural Education* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2008): 3-16.

Ott. Eleanor. “Get Up and Go: Refugee Resettlement and Secondary Migration in the USA.” *UNHCR*. September 2011. https://www.unhcr.org/media/get-and-go-refugee-resettlement-and-secondary-migration-usa-eleanor-ott

Passerini, Luisa, Gabriele Proglio, and Milicia Trakilović, eds. *The Mobility of Memory: Migration and Diasporas Across European Borders.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2021.

Po Cha, Ya. *An Introduction to Hmong Culture*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2010.

Pribbenow, Merle L., trans. *Victory in Vietnam: The Official History of the People’s Army of Vietnam, 1954-1975*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002.

Quincy, Keith, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat: The Hmong and America’s Secret War in Laos*. Spokane, Washington: Eastern Washington University Press, 2000.

“Regions of Birth for Immigrants in the United States, 1960-Present.” *Migration Policy Institute*. Accessed April 20, 2023. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#Diaspora

Robinet, Fabrice. “Welcome, Refugees. Now Pay Back Your Travel Loans.” *The New York Times*. March 15, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/nyregion/refugees-travel-loans.html

Rumbaut, Ruben. “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States in the United States.” *The International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1160-1205.

Rutledge, Paul. *The Vietnamese Experience in America.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Sangalang, Cindy C. and Cindy Vang. “Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systemic Review.” *Journal of Immigrant Minor Health*. June 19, 2017: 745-754.

Schein, Louis. “The Miao in Contemporary China.” In *The Hmong Transition*, edited by Glenn Hendricks, Bruce Downing, and Amos Deinard, 73-86. Staten Island: Center for Migration Studies of New York, 1986.

Schneider, Pat. “Hmong Story Cloths a Fading Art: Now Women Also Use Sewing Skills for Others.” *Madison Capital Times*. (January 29, 2002).

Schultz, Jr.., Richard H. *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam*. Perennial, 2000.

Smith, Clint. *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America.* New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2021.

Spickard, Paul. “Mapping Race: Multicultural People and Racial Category Constructions in the United States and Britain.” *Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration, and Diaspora* 15, no. 2 (June 21, 2010): 107-119.

Symonds, Patricia V. *Calling in the Soul: Gender and Cycle of Life in a Hmong Village*. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2003.

Tapp, Nicholas. “Cultural Accommodations in Southwest China: The ‘Han Miao’ and the Problems in the Ethnography of the Hmong.” *Asian Folklore Studies* 61, no. 1 (2002): 77-104.

“The Hmong in America.” *Wilson Quarterly* 9, no. 5 (Winter 1985): 22-24.

Turner, Sarah, Christine Bonnin, and Jean Michaud. “Hmong Upland Livelihood Essentials.” In *Frontier Livelihoods: Hmong in the Sing-Vietnamese Borderlands.* 35-46. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 2015.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *The State of the World’s Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Vang, Chia Youvee. *An Oral History of Hmong Pilots in the Vietnam War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Vang, Chia Youvee. *Hmong in Minnesota*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008.

Vang, Cindy, Pa Thor, and Michael Sieng. “Influencing Factors of Loneliness among Hmong Older Adults in Premigration, Displacement, and Postmigration Phases.” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2 (2021): 3464-3485.

Vang, Lue and Judy Lewis. *Grandmother’s Path, Grandfather’s Way: Oral Lore, Generation to Generation*. San Francisco, California: Vang & Lewis, 1990.

Vang, Ma. *History on the Run: Secrecy, Fugitivity, and Hmong Refugee Epistemologies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Vayrynen, Raimo. “Funding Dilemmas in Refugee Assistance: Political Interests and Institutional Reforms in the UNHCR.” *The International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001).

Vo, Mghia M. *The Vietnamese Boat People, 1954 and 1975-1992*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, 2006.

Warner, Roger. *Back Fire: The CIA’s Secret War in Laos and Its Link to the War in Vietnam*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

Wilcox, Don. *Hmong Folklife*. Hmong Natural Association of North Carolina, 1986.

Winter, Bronwyn and Cat Moi, editors. *Reformation, Revolution, and Crisis in Europe: Landmarks in History, Memory, and Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2020.

Yang, Kou. *The Making of Hmong America: Forty Years After the Secret War*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017.

Yau, Jennifer. "The Foreign-Born Hmong in the United States." *Migration Policy Institute*. January 1, 2005. https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/foreign-born-hmong-united-states

Young, Kayla. "North Carolina immigrants reports language, discrimination as barriers to health care." *WFAE Charlottee's NPR News Source*. November 15, 2023. https://www.wfae.org/race-equity/2023-11-15/north-carolina-immigrants-report-language-discrimination-as-barriers-to-health-care

Zhou, Li. "The inadequacy of the term 'Asian American.'" *Vox*. (May 5, 2021). https://www.vox.com/identities/22380197/asian-american-pacific-islander-aapi-heritage-anti-asian-hate-attacks

Websites

"Family of Refugees and Asylees." U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://www.uscis.gov/family/family-of-refugees-and-asylees.

Hmong North Carolina Women's Association, https://nc-hwa.org/.

Hmong Southeast Puavphej, https://hmongsoutheastpuavpheej.org/about/

"Information for Refugee Students." Welcome Corps. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://welcomecorps.org/campus/information-for-refugee-students/

McRae Industries. Accessed January 25, 2024. https://www.mcraeindustries.com/

"Reception and Placement-United States Department of State." U.S. Department of States. February 15, 2023. https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/reception-and-placement/

"Refugee Camps." UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed March 11, 2024. https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/camps/#:~:text=From%20cell%20phone%20stores%20to,built%20in%20a%20refugee%20camp.

"Refugee travel documents." UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed June 28, 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/complementary-pathways-admission-third-4#:~:text=UNHCR%20advocates%20for%20States%20to%20be%20issuing%20and,countries%20of%20asylum%20be%20easily%20renewed%20at%20embassies

“Resettlement.” UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed January 23, 2024. https://www.unhcr.org/us/what-we-do/build-better-futures/long-term-solutions/resettlement#:~:text=Resettlement%20is%20unique%20in%20that,refugees%20are%20resettled%20each%20year.

“Resettlement Agencies.” The Administration for Children and Families. Rev. February 28, 2023. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/grant-funding/resettlement-agencies.

“U.S. Refugee Admissions Program Access Categories.” U.S. Department of State. Accessed January 20, 2024. https://2017-2021.state.gov/refugee-admissions/u-s-refugee-admissions-program-access-categories/.

Videos

“How the Lee Family Preserves Its Hmong Heritage Through Farming.” *My Home, NC on PBS NC*. May 2, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOZOBjCgMEY.

Long, Larry and Eileen Littig, producers. *Being Hmong Means Being Free: A Video Portrait of Hmong Life and Culture in Today’s America*. Center for Asian American Media, 2000.

McSilver, Jim and Sarita Siegel. *The Split Horn: The Life of a Hmong Shaman in America*. Collective Eye. 2002.

APPENDIX A: CAST OF CHARACTERS

Bee Chong Kao Vang: Bee Chong Kao Vang was a Hmong refugee who studied in the Lao capital, Vientiane when the city was overthrown. He escaped across the Mekong River into Thailand around June 1975. He was initially resettled in Mobile, Alamba, then briefly lived in La Crosse, Wisconsin before permanently resettling in North Carolina. He was an active member of the Hmong community and heavily involved in the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej.

Chia and Choua Tong Xiong Yang: Chia and Choua Tong Xiong Yang were married Hmong refugees who initially resettled in Yuba, California before moving to North Carolina. Tong Xiong was a soldier during the Secret War. Chia Yang prided herself in her embroidery and would teach children and women sewing while in the Ban Vinai camp.

Ellen Bruno: Ellen Bruno was a volunteer in Southeast Asia who worked with reuniting refugee families after the wars in region. She is now a filmmaker who resides in California.

Kay Ying Lo: Kay Ying Lo, a Hmong refugee, was a young teenager when her and her family first arrived in Syracuse, New York. Her family then moved to Wisconsin where they stayed for a significant period. In 1994-1995, after she married her husband, they moved down to North Carolina. While she never held an official position within any Hmong organizations, she was heavily involved in the Hmong community and even worked as an interpreter for the Catawba County School District.

Mai Yang: Mai Vang is a daughter of Hmong refugees who often found herself caring for her younger siblings. She attended school at the University of Chapel Hill and is a co-founder of the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association.

Mylo Lor: Mylo Lor is the daughter of Hmong refugees. She and her family lived in Wisconsin before she married her husband at age thirteen and moved to North Carolina where she finished school and became a mother.

Nao Chao Lor: Nao Chao Lor was a Hmong refugee born in the Xiang Khouang province and eventually resettled in North Carolina.

Nhia Thong Yang: Nhia Thong Yang was a Hmong solider and refugee who was involved with the war effort since 1963. He initially arrived in Virgina before briefly living in Illinois and Minnesota before moving to North Carolina in 1990. He was also heavily involved in the organization of the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej.

Neng Xiong: Neng Xiong was a Hmong refugee who was forced to live in the jungles for six or seven years after the communist takeover in Laos before eventually finding refuge at the Ban Vinai camp in Thailand. He was part of one of the last groups of Hmong refugees in Ban Vinai before the camp officially closed. He initially arrived in California in 1990 and briefly lived in Minnesota before moving to North Carolina in 2010. He has been heavily involved with the Hmong community and was president of the Hmong Southeast Puavpheej in 2017.

Pai Lee: Pai Lee was a Hmong refugee whose village was bombed during the war. She and her daughter were abandoned by her first husband and forced to flee to a refugee camp on their own. They were resettled in California where Pai Lee married her second husband before moving the North Carolina.

Pang Vang: Pang Vang was a Hmong refugee who was a child when he first arrived to the U.S. He has been heavily involved in the North Carolina Hmong community and briefly returned to Thailand during his young adult years to help process Hmong refugees who still lived in camps.

Timmy Xiong: Timmy Xiong is a son of Hmong refugees. He was originally born in St. Paul, Minnesota before he and his family relocated to North Carolina.

Xiong Lor: Xiong Lor was a Hmong refugee who resettled to the U.S. with his family in 1979. He and his family spent some time in Minnesota before they moved to North Carolina in the mid-1980s.

Yang Por Xiong: Yang Por Xiong was a Hmong refugee who was only fourteen or fifteen when he initially arrived to the U.S. He and his family first arrived in Fresno, California before resettling in North Carolina. He held a position with the Xiong Family Union.

Yer Lee: Yer Lee is a daughter of Hmong refugees who initially resided in Connecticut before relocating to North Carolina. She attended Wake Forest University and is a co-founder of the North Carolina Hmong Women's Association.

APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

Offices and organizations related to refugee resettlement:[479]

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM): The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration is a division within the United States Department of State responsible for formulating and implementing policies and programs related to refugees, humanitarian assistance, and migration issues. It oversees the U.S. refugee admissions program, provides financial assistance and support to refugees and humanitarian organizations, and coordinates with international partners and organizations.

Bureau for Refugee Programs (BRP): The Bureau for Refugee Programs is a division within the United States Department of State that focuses on providing assistance and support to refugees worldwide. It develops and implements programs to address the needs of refugees, including their protection, resettlement, and integration. The BRP works in collaboration with other government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs to address refugee issues.

Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS): The Department of Health and Human Services is a U.S. government department responsible for promoting and protecting the health and well-being of Americans. In the context of refugees and migration, DHHS plays a role through the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which provides various services and assistance to refugees, including housing, healthcare, social services, and educational support.

Department of Homeland Security (DHS): The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) plays a role in the U.S. refugee resettlement process, working in collaboration with other federal agencies and non-profit organizations. Specifically, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a component of DHS, is responsible for processing refugee applications and conducting interviews to determine eligibility for refugee status. The DHS also works with other agencies, such as the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services, to coordinate the admission and resettlement of refugees. The department ensures that individuals granted refugee status undergo necessary security screenings before being admitted to the United States. While DHS focuses on security aspects, other agencies handle the post-arrival aspects of refugee resettlement, including placement, support, and integration into American society.

Department of State (DOS): The Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) within the Department of State is primarily responsible for managing U.S. humanitarian assistance and refugee admissions programs. This includes coordinating with international organizations, resettlement agencies, and other countries to address global refugee issues. The Department of State works closely with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to identify and refer individuals for resettlement to the United States. It also collaborates with partner countries and NGOs to provide support for refugees in need of resettlement. Additionally, the Department of State oversees the allocation of funds to assist refugees and helps coordinate their initial reception and placement in the United States through its partnerships with domestic resettlement agencies. Overall, the Department of State plays a key role in managing and facilitating the resettlement process for refugees coming to the United States.

---

[479] Adapted from Diya Abdo, “Names and Numbers,” in *American Refuge: True Stories of the Refugee Experience* (Steerforth Press, 2022): 124-135 and Diya Abdo, Christian Matheis, Sonalini Sapra, and Ashley Loper-Nowak, *AHLAN Manual: A Manual for Establishing Resettlement Campuses Together (AMERiCA-Together)*, Every Campus A Refuge: Greensboro, NC, September 2023; https://everycampusarefuge.net/ahlan/

Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS): The Immigration and Naturalization Services was a former agency within the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for overseeing immigration and naturalization processes. In 2003, it was abolished and its functions were transferred to various components of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, including the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

International Organization for Migration (IOM): The International Organization for Migration is an intergovernmental organization that provides services and advice concerning migration to its member states. It works to ensure humane and orderly migration by promoting international cooperation, providing assistance to migrants in need, and addressing migration-related challenges, including refugee resettlement, voluntary return, and integration.

Multicultural Center (MCC): A multicultural center refers to a physical or virtual space designed to promote diversity, inclusivity, and cultural understanding within a community or educational institution. These centers serve as hubs for individuals from different cultural, ethnic, and social backgrounds to gather, share experiences, and engage in dialogue. They provide resources, programming, and support services that celebrate and educate about various cultures, identities, and perspectives. Multicultural centers may offer workshops, events, and exhibitions that explore and highlight different cultural traditions, histories, and contemporary issues. They often provide counseling, mentorship, and advocacy services to support the academic and personal success of students from diverse backgrounds. The goal of a multicultural center is to foster a welcoming and inclusive environment, facilitate intercultural exchange, and cultivate a sense of belonging and respect among all members of the community.

Mutual Aid Association (MAA): A mutual aid association refers to a voluntary organization formed by a group of individuals who come together to provide support, assistance, and resources to meet the needs of their members. These associations are typically based on a shared common interest, such as a particular profession, cultural or ethnic background, or a specific cause. Members pool their resources, skills, and knowledge to address challenges collectively, whether it be financial support during times of hardship, access to healthcare, educational opportunities, or social support. Mutual aid associations operate on principles of reciprocity and solidarity, where members contribute and receive assistance based on their needs and the collective resources available. These associations often play a vital role in supporting marginalized or underserved communities and promoting self-reliance, empowerment, and community resilience.

Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): The Office of Refugee Resettlement is an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It is responsible for providing support and assistance to refugees, asylees, and other populations in need of resettlement in the United States.

ORR oversees programs related to housing, healthcare, employment, language training, and social services to help refugees integrate into American society.

Office of the United States Coordinator for Refugee Affairs (USCRA): The Office of the United States Coordinator for Refugee Affairs is a department-level position within the U.S. government responsible for coordinating and managing refugee-related matters. The coordinator works closely with other government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs to develop policies, allocate resources, and ensure the effective response to refugee crises and the protection of refugee rights.

Office of Reception and Placement (R&P): The Office of Reception and Placement is a division within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). It is responsible for coordinating and overseeing the initial reception and placement of refugees arriving in the United States. This includes providing housing, basic necessities, and support services to help refugees transition and adjust to their new communities.

Resettlement Agency (RA): A resettlement agency is an organization that works in partnership with the U.S. government to assist refugees in their resettlement process. These agencies provide various services such as reception, initial housing, cultural orientation, language assistance, employment support, and social services to help refugees rebuild their lives in the United States.

United Nations of High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a specialized agency of the United Nations that is responsible for the protection and assistance of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide. Established in 1950, the UNHCR works to ensure the well-being and rights of refugees, advocating for their access to essential services, education, healthcare, and legal protection. The organization plays a key role in providing humanitarian aid, coordinating international efforts, and seeking durable solutions for forced displacement, including voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. The UNHCR works closely with governments, NGOs, and other partners to address the needs of refugees and contribute to global efforts in refugee protection and assistance.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS): The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is an agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Its primary responsibility is to administer and oversee the immigration system of the United States. USCIS processes applications for various immigration benefits, including naturalization, permanent residency (green cards), work permits, and visas. The agency also conducts interviews, background checks, and other procedures to determine eligibility for immigration benefits. USCIS plays a crucial role in implementing U.S. immigration laws and regulations, ensuring the integrity of the immigration process, and promoting lawful immigration to the United States.

United States Refugee Admissions Programs: USRAP stands for the United States Refugee Admissions Program. It is a program administered by the U.S. government in partnership with international organizations and non-profit agencies to provide refuge and protection to individuals fleeing persecution and conflict in their home countries. USRAP operates under the authority of the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) and is overseen by the U.S. Department of State in collaboration with other government agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services. The program involves various steps, including refugee identification and processing, security screenings, medical examinations, and cultural orientation, with the ultimate goal of resettling eligible refugees in the United States and helping them establish a new life in safety and dignity.

Voluntary Agency: VOLAG stands for "Voluntary Agency." In the context of refugee resettlement in the United States, VOLAGs are non-profit organizations that partner with the U.S. government to provide assistance and support to refugees during their resettlement process. These agencies play a significant role in coordinating and implementing various services, such as reception, placement, housing, employment, language training, and social integration programs. While VOLAGs have historically been an integral part of the refugee resettlement infrastructure, their usage and terminology have become less common in recent years. The shift away from using the term "VOLAG" is primarily due to changes in the way the U.S. government administers and structures refugee resettlement programs. In recent years, the U.S. government has moved towards a more centralized approach, with increased involvement from the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which operates within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This shift has led to a decrease in the number of individual VOLAGs being directly contracted and funded, with more emphasis on cooperative agreements and partnerships with local service providers. As a result of these changes, the term VOLAG is not used as frequently today. However, the essential work and functions that VOLAGs traditionally performed in assisting refugees with their resettlement needs continue to be carried out by various non-profit organizations and service providers under the broader framework of refugee resettlement programs.

Welcome Corps: Welcome Corps refers to a program or initiative aimed at creating a warm and supportive environment for refugees and immigrants in their new communities. It typically involves a group of volunteers, often organized by local governments, non-profit organizations, or community groups, who are dedicated to assisting newcomers with their integration and providing practical assistance. The Welcome Corps may offer services such as language support, cultural orientation, access to healthcare and social services, job training, housing assistance, and community engagement opportunities. The primary objective of a Welcome Corps is to foster a sense of belonging, empower refugees and immigrants to become self-sufficient, and promote cross-cultural understanding and acceptance. By actively engaging with newcomers and addressing their specific needs, Welcome Corps programs contribute to building inclusive and resilient communities that embrace diversity and provide equal opportunities for all. The new government initiative rolled out in early 2023. Subdivisions of Welcome Corps include Welcome Corps on Campus and Welcome Corps at Work, both of which have the same overarching goal as Welcome Corps but is tailored toward higher education and employment in the U.S. respectively.

Terms used to when describing migrants:

Asylum Seeker: An asylum seeker is an individual who has left their home country and seeks protection in another country because they fear persecution or danger due to their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. They have applied for asylum and are awaiting a decision on their refugee status.

DACAmented: The term "DACAmented" refers to individuals who have received protection under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in the United States. DACA provides temporary relief from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the country as children.

Deportation: Deportation is the process of forcibly removing an individual from a country because they have violated immigration laws or do not have legal permission to stay. It involves the formal expulsion of a person back to their home country or another designated place.

Diaspora: Diaspora refers to a scattered population or community of people who are dispersed or have migrated from their original homeland to different parts of the world. It often implies a collective identity or connection among individuals from the same cultural, ethnic, or national background.

Displaced: Displaced refers to individuals or groups who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence due to conflict, violence, natural disasters, or human rights violations. They have not crossed an international border and are often referred to as internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Expatriate: An expatriate, or expat, is an individual who lives outside their home country, often voluntarily, for employment, education, or personal reasons. Expatriates maintain strong ties to their home country while residing abroad.

First Generation Refugee/Immigrant: First-generation included individuals who were foreign-born. The one-and-a-half generation includes individuals who were children when they first arrived to the U.S.

Humanitarian Parole: Humanitarian parole is a temporary immigration status granted to individuals who face urgent humanitarian reasons or compelling emergencies. It allows them to enter or remain in a country for a limited period, even if they do not meet the standard immigration requirements.

Immigrant: An immigrant is a person who has chosen to permanently relocate from their home country to another country, often seeking better economic opportunities, family reunification, or a higher quality of life. Immigrants typically go through the legal immigration process and obtain legal status in the host country.

Internally Displaced: Internally displaced refers to individuals or groups who have been forced to flee their homes or places of habitual residence but have not crossed an international border. They remain within their own country and are often in need of assistance and protection.

Irregular Migration: Irregular migration, also known as undocumented or illegal migration, refers to the movement of individuals across international borders without proper authorization or in violation of immigration laws. It often involves irregular border crossings or overstaying visas.

Migrant: A migrant is a broad term that encompasses individuals who move from one place to another, whether within their own country (internal migration) or across international borders (international migration). Migrants can include various categories such as labor migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and others.

Migrant Worker: A migrant worker is an individual who moves to another country, often temporarily, to seek employment and earn a living. Migrant workers may have legal permission to work in the host country, usually through specific labor programs or visas.

Refugee: A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave their home country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. They have crossed an international border and cannot return home safely. Refugees are protected by international laws and conventions.

Resettlement: Resettlement refers to the process of relocating refugees from the country where they have sought asylum to a third country that has agreed to provide them with permanent settlement and legal protection. Resettlement is often seen as a durable solution for refugees who cannot return home or integrate into the host country.

Second-Generation Refugee/Immigrant: Second-generation includes individuals who were born in the United States. The one-and-a-half generation includes individuals who were children when they first arrived to the U.S.

Stateless: A stateless person is someone who does not belong to their home country and has yet to be resettled. An unsettled refugee.

Undocumented: Undocumented refers to individuals who are residing in a country without legal authorization or proper immigration status. They may have entered the country without going through the official immigration processes or have overstayed their authorized period of stay. Undocumented individuals often face limitations and challenges in accessing public services, employment opportunities, and legal protections. The term is commonly used to describe immigrants who lack legal documentation in the context of immigration policies and debates.

APPENDIX C: REFUGEE ARRIVAL DATA

Table C1. Southeast Asian Refugee Arrivals in the United States by Nationality, FY 1975-1989[480]

FY	Cambodia	Laos	Vietnam	Total
1975	4,600	800	125,000	130,400
1976	1,100	10,200	3,200	14,500
1977	300	400	1,900	2,600
1978	1,300	8,000	11,100	20,400
1979	6,000	30,200	44,500	80,700
1980	16,000	55,500	95,200	166,700
1981	27,100	19,300	86,100	132,500
1982	20,234	9,437	43,656	73,327
1983	13,114	2,835	23,459	39,408
1984	19,851	7,291	24,818	51,960
1985	19,097	5,416	25,457	49,970
1986	9,789	12,869	22,796	45,454
1987	1,539	15,564	23,012	40,115
1988	2,805	14,556	17,654	35,015
1989	1,916	12,432	22,664	37,012

---

[480] Ann Rynearson, Thomas Gosebrink, and Barrie Gewanter, "Barriers to Censusing Southeast Asian Refugees, Final Join Statistical Agreement 88-20," sponsored by Center for Survey Methods Research (Bureau of the Census: Washington, DC, June 1990), 81, https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/1990/adrm/ex90-10.pdf

Table C2. Southeast Asian Population in the United States, 1970 and 1980 [481]

United States Asian Population	**1970**	**1980**
Cambodian	0	16,044
Hmong	0	5,204
Laotian	0	47,683
Vietnamese	0	245,025
Total	1,426,140	3,466,421

Table C3. Refugees and Asylees Granted Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Selected Country of Birth, FY 1961-1988 [482]

Country	**1961-1970**	**1971-80**	**1981-88**	**Total**
Cambodia	-	7,739	103,697	111,436
Laos	-	21,690	121,108	142,798
Vietnam	7	150,266	282,033	432,306

---

[481] Ann Rynearson, Thomas Gosebrink, and Barrie Gewanter, "Barriers to Censusing Southeast Asian Refugees, Final Join Statistical Agreement 88-20," 89.

[482] Ann Rynearson, Thomas Gosebrink, and Barrie Gewanter, "Barriers to Censusing Southeast Asian Refugees, Final Join Statistical Agreement 88-20," 88.