A HISTORY OF HMONG MEN:
PEB LEEJ TXIV LUB NEEJ
(OUR FATHERS’ LIVES)

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN
DECEMBER 2013
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Abstract

Through the story of Cher Her, a Hmong man, this paper will discuss the lives and experiences of Hmong men during the evacuation of Long Cheng in 1975, the journey to the refugee camps, and leaving Thailand for resettlement in America. This narrative addresses how these men escaped persecution from communist forces, and led their families to refugee camps in Thailand. The flight presented many challenges: coping with new laws, their masculinity and pride taken away from them. It explores how the lives of Hmong men were affected by leaving Thailand, an place similar to their homeland, and entering a new world where social economics and culture shock has “flipped them upside down,” feeling like they now reside at the bottom of the family structure.
Acknowledgement

I would like to take this time to thank my mentor and friend Joseph Orser. He supported and helped me push forward in Hmong Studies. At times when I felt like giving up, his belief in me pushed me forward. Also, by including me in a collaborative research project supported by funding from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire’s ORSP, I am given the opportunity to travel to Thailand to meet Hmong elders and interview them about the experiences of Hmong refugee men. Dr. Orser impacted my life greatly and made me change and think more critically about my research and life.

Dr. Reiko Shinno also encouraged me to pursue my interest in Hmong history. She also helped me develop a topical minor in Transnational Asian Studies. She is always willing to meet with me and discuss my research and Hmong Studies. Dr. Shinno introduced me to some of the theoretical models regarding Hmong Studies and helped build my understanding on these subjects.

I would also like to thank my whole family for their understanding and support of the project, especially my wife, Kia Jennifer Vang. She is always there for me during the stressful times and good times; she has never stopped believing in me, and she always finds ways to motivate me. Even though she was tired from work, she stayed up with me during the late nights and helped looked over my paper. I truly thank her from the bottom of my heart, for without her, I doubt this paper would have reached completion. She is truly an amazing person, friend and wife.

I would like to thank my father and mother, who have always wanted the best for me. A special thanks to my father, who shared his story and knowledge about the Hmong people with me. Although he holds neither a Ph.D. nor a professorship, in my eyes he holds more: he is an
incredible father, he is a hero to my family and me, and he is like a teacher to me. His stories and knowledge about Hmong history and culture motivated me to study history and to learn more about my culture and my origins. Without him I would have never picked up this interest and be where I am today in life. This paper would have not been possible without his assistance and patience.
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my father, one of the men who went through the experiences of sacrificing everything he had to bring his children to America for a better future. I also dedicate it to all of the Hmong men who experienced similar events, and to all men who faced and survived similar experiences as these Hmong men. And for my wife, Kia Jennifer Vang, for the love and support she gave that pushed me forward throughout this semester. She never stopped believing in me and my work.
Introduction

In the lobby at the dentist’s office, Cher Her and his daughter Jenny waited for her appointment. When Jenny’s turn came, Cher talked with the dentist’s assistant, asking him to fix the tooth instead of extracting it, since extracting would eventually make the rest of the teeth unbalanced and crooked. The assistant told Cher, since his daughter’s tooth was half decayed; the process would be too complicated and recommended that taking it out would be easier. Cher disagreed again, and insisted on fixing the tooth. The assistant, feeling frustrated, went into the back. After a few minutes, he came back out to explain his recommendation. This time he brought the doctor with him. The doctor introduced himself to Cher, stating that he was a doctor and recommended that the tooth should be extracted as the assistant had mentioned earlier. Cher responded, he too was a dentist for six years in Thailand and the tooth did not have to come out; it is possible to fill in and patch it back to normal. Cher explained to the doctor how he would fix the tooth by taking a wire to wrap around the tooth then filling it in with filling. The doctor agreed with Cher’s technique, but did not approve in these circumstances. If Cher did not agree with the dentist, then he and his daughter could leave. Cher’s expertise, from another place and another culture, was not worth much in the eyes of this doctor.

Leaving his family members, country, and home behind, Cher sacrificed everything he had to come to America. After reaching America, he lost all of his credibility and felt like a powerless child all over again. He had to start from scratch since none of his achievements during his life in Thailand was acknowledged. In Laos the majority of these men owned their own land, held government positions, and received acknowledgement for the things they did. After America’s secret war in Laos, which
coincided with the Vietnam War, the majority of these men were forced into exile and left Laos, or stayed to fight with the resistance group. Many men stayed behind, hoping they could win this fight and maybe someday see a land of their own. Thousands, however, knew they would lose the war and followed their leader General Vang Pao to Thailand, where their journey to America would start.

When reading this paper, one needs to keep in mind that it does not represent all Hmong people; there are various groups of Hmong and each group had their own experiences. For example, there are the Hmong Chinese, Hmong Thai, and Hmong Vietnamese. Also, not all Hmong men sided with the U.S during the war; hence, this project does not represent all Hmong men, but the Hmong Lao men who went through the events and traumas during the 1960s to 1990s.

Over the past decades, scholars who have written about the Hmong were mainly of European descent. Only recently in the 21st century did Hmong historians begin to tell their own history. Until now most scholars focused their work on the experiences of soldiers in the “Secret War,” or an important key player such as General Vang Pao, and the war itself.1 Another area of scholarship, focuses on Hmong experiences in America, how these refugees adapted to the changes they faced.2 Others still explore Hmong women’s experiences and gender roles.3 Although the majority of the research include Hmong men, few studies focus mainly on what it meant to be a Hmong man during this time, how their lives as Hmong men changed and were affected by the war.

When talking about Hmong men, one cannot ignore the fact that these men took part in the Secret War. One scholarly work that addresses this is journalist Jane Hamilton-Merritt’s book *Tragic Mountains*. Hamilton starts off with the Hmong involvement in World War II, during which the invasion of the Japanese in Laos prompted their recruitment by the French to fight for Indo-China. Later Hamilton explores different events going on during the Secret War inside Laos, such as the resistance group known as the Chao Fa and the struggles the Hmong faced during this unofficial war. Her work ends with the U.S. evacuation in 1975 from Vietnam, an event that left the Hmong to fend for themselves and Vang Pao to leave Laos to come to America. Hamilton acknowledges that the Hmong were recruited by the U.S. to be used in the war, then were left to defend for themselves. She argues that the two groups depended on each other and came to an agreement to help each other. However, she mainly focused on Hmong leader General Vang Pao throughout her book, an understandable emphasis since Vang Pao is such an important figure, one that defects attention from knowing how other men felt during this time of struggle. Hamilton believed that the identity of the Hmong people was not yet known to the American public, and she hoped her book would contribute to creating a Hmong identity and ease the pain of broken hearts. Unfortunately, Hamilton-Merritt’s tone sounds pitiful towards the Hmong, making it seem as though the Hmong were hopeless and had no agency.


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5 Ibid, xxvi.
German descent but lacking knowledge of that culture or any particular connection with contemporary Germans, Hillmer feels the current Hmong generation faces a similar phase of letting their culture slide through their fingers, as he did⁶. For that reason his book tries to explain the experience of the Hmong from 1945 to the present through what he calls the six C’s: culture, conflicts, catastrophe, camp, citizenship, and contemporary issues. Hillmer not only relied on scholarly resources, but drew from 220 interviews he conducted over the years of his research. Overall his book’s main goal was to help add more identity to Hmong refugees and Hmong-Americans, and provide an understanding of the Hmong experiences to those who do not know about the Hmong. His book does assist Americans’ understanding of Hmong refugees’ lives, but it does not delve deeply into the lives of Hmong men. Someone who sought to understand the lives of Hmong men would have to read between the lines of his work, make assumptions or pursue in more in-depth research. For example, to understand men’s role and their lives during this chaotic time, one would have to understand gender roles and how women played in these men’s lives.

Looking at gender roles between the Hmong men and women, anthropologist Nancy D. Donnelly explores the roles women played in Laos, Thailand, and America in her ethnographic Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women. Her work shows that women were underrepresented and usually not acknowledged for what they did. At the start of her work Donnelly noticed that women were usually the ones working and sweating: the men, on the other hand, were usually relax and doing other things that were not related to chores. With this picture in mind, Donnelly quickly concluded that females are considered inferior in the Hmong society⁷. Therefore, her work in Seattle focused around newly arriving Hmong refugee women. She noted a few scholars

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who had also done work on Hmong refugees, but these latter usually stayed away from
women’s perspectives.

This paper is authored from a member of the Hmong community in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. As a first-generation Hmong and speaker of this language, this means I have access to more meaningful information from the elders, and a better understanding of their perspectives and struggles on a different level than a non-Hmong. My fluency in Hmong means there is no language barrier and eliminates any need for a translator. Historian Chia Youyee Vang stated this concept in her book, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*: “When language is not a barrier between researcher and interviewee, I believe that stories are told or experiences are explained differently due to the common culture knowledge”. Beyond the words themselves, my knowledge of how the Hmong community’s communication process operates allows me to avoid awkward moments or sensitive questions, and to approach interviewees from a culturally appropriate perspective.

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Following the life of Cher Her, this paper does not focus on the Secret War and soldiers’ experience, but rather on the experience of Hmong men as they left Laos and relocated in America. As someone who experienced these events first-hand in May of 1969, Cher is unique because of his membership within the older Hmong generation that is slowly dying. He can relate many untold stories about a history that otherwise would not be heard. Running through the jungle striving for his family’s survival, living in camps, experiencing relocation to new part of the world, losing a sense of who he is, but never outrunning the trauma of dislocation. This paper explores what it meant to be a Hmong man during the flight in Laos, refugee camps, and leaving Thailand.

**History of the Hmong**
Many scholars debate where the Hmong originated. The earliest date mentioned of the
Hmong can be dated back to as early as the Yellow King of China when members of the Hmong
ethnic group lived in the hills of Southern China with their leader Chih You. After Chih You’s
defeat by Huang-ti, an ancient Chinese King, the Hmong faced persecutions and therefore
thousands migrated out of China into Indochina (Southeast Asia). On the other hand, not all
Hmong left China; there is still a sizeable concentration of Hmong living in the hills of southern
China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Hunan) as of today. The Hmong in China are called by
the term “Miao,” which refers to all of the Chinese minority groups living in China. Hmong

People find “Miao” derogatory and avoid it whenever possible.11

After colonizing Indochina, the French recruited the Hmong in Laos to help fight
the Japanese during World War II. Led by Touby Lyfong in 1944, the Hmong assisted
the French and fought off the Japanese. After WWII the French reconquered Indochina,

10 “French Indochina,” Map, Angie’s Diary, June 2012.
Vietnam fell into communist’s hand and fought against the French. With the French unable to fight anymore, the Americans joined the fight against the communists, but asked the French for help. The French told them to recruit these people living in the hills of Laos to help the American fight since they knew the land.  

In January of 1961 Hmong military leader General Vang Pao was recruited by U.S. Central Intelligence Agent (CIA), Bill Lair. Vang Pao was offered military support from the U.S. to help defend his people if he and his men joined the fight against the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. The main objective of their duty was to help retrieve American and Thai pilots who had been shot down, perform hit-and-run missions on the enemy, stop the transportation of supplies from Northern Vietnam to Southern Vietnam through Laos, and defend bases. Since this operation was not public knowledge, it was known as the Secret War. The Hmong recruits were only trained for three days then assigned to missions. The majority of the Hmong who fought at that time were trained in guerilla warfare.

During 1962 to 1964 Laos remained quiet and still; the war had not yet begun. However, in 1968 the war started to spread and the Hmong were focused to fight the communists. At this time Vang Pao decided to reorganize his army by letting those elder soldiers who were no longer fit to fight go and creating a small army called the Special Guerilla Unit (SGU), which fought to protect the secret base known as Long Cheng. From this point forward the Hmong were no longer simply defending bases and stopping supplies routes, but were fighting on the front lines.

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14 Ibid, 3.
16 Ibid, 249.
17 Ibid, 249
The Journey

Laos\textsuperscript{18}

Born on December 3rd, 1962, Ntxawg (Cher) was born into the “Her” clan in a small village in northern Laos called Nayua located in the Military Region II or Xieng Khouang Province. He lived with his five sisters, five brothers, mother (Zoua Vang), and father (Chai Her). When the secret war started to pick up towards the end of the 1960s, the communist party closed in on their village. Communist soldiers stationed themselves on the Phao Kou hill right next to Nayua. In May of 1969, in the middle of the night, the Vietcong and Pathet Lao attacked the Hmong base in Nayua called Tham Tak Bling. Waking up to the sound of gunfire, people screaming, and to his father who grabbed him by the arm, seven-year-old Cher clamped tightly onto his father’s leg in the midst of all the chaotic commotion. Desperate for their safety, Cher’s

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20 During this time period, Hmong people kept track of dates by seasons, therefore it is hard to pinpoint Cher’s actual birthday, but for the purpose of this project I am going by the date given to him when he registered for resettlement in the U.S.
21 Cher Her, interview by Khong Meng Her, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
father like many other Hmong families quickly fled into the jungle with no time to pack anything. Escaping under the morning sky, the only things Cher saw were houses blown apart, pieces of rubbles and stalks flew all over, people ran around frantically, and gun shots zoomed through the sky like fireworks. Cher glanced back to the village and saw communist soldiers march into the village with their Ak-47s and bazookas attacking the retreating Hmong soldiers. Not knowing where to go, they followed small dirt roads and ran until they knew they were far enough. About an hour later a red flare was shot into the sky; it signaled the death of the Colonel Tong Wa Lor, who was in charge of the base, Tham Tak Bling, during the mayhem.\footnote{Ibid}
Running for their lives, Cher’s father took the family three miles away to hide from the attack, in hopes of being able to return back to the village later on the same day to gather their belongings. Around seven in the morning, the sun rose and the battle was over. Cher’s father along with Cher and the family headed back towards the village when they saw one of their relatives coming from the village. Their brother-in-law’s wife was crying and carrying on her back her oldest daughter, Mai Yang, age 13, whose right foot was hit by a bullet and covered with a bloodied cloth; her youngest, Mai Chou, age 12, walked in front. All she said to them was, “Do not stay, keep going, your brother-in-law is dead.” With nowhere to go, many Hmong from Nayua headed to the next closest village, Sam Thong, a three-hour walk. They arrived at Sam Thong around the afternoon and bought rice from villagers with the little money they had.

23 Ibid
24 Ibid
After eating breakfast, Cher and his family walked to Muang Paen village, and slept there for the night. Cher was woken up in the morning by the noise of people running again. Soldiers from Sam Thong had come to warn the villagers that Sam Thong has been overrun by the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese army and the soldiers were retreating. The family packed and rushed downhill towards the Namnguen River. Although it was not a huge river but the current was strong and none of them were great swimmers. Other families crossed this river by tying bamboo thickets together to make rafts to cross, but that took too much time. Cher’s father along with his other two brothers took the family to a shallower section of the river. They tied a string around everyone’s waist. Cher’s father slowly led the family across the river by stepping on rocks that could hold their weight and balance them against the currents. Cher was tied to his mother and grabbed onto her belt tightly to make sure he was secured. When the family finally crossed the river, they headed towards fifth zone or Vang Vieng Province since the communists had not reached that area yet.

Within the fifth zone, Cher and his family stayed in a small village known as Pha Kea. People were dying from diseases and Cher’s mother became ill. “Seeing how people were dying every day, I started to cry when my mother got sick, I feared I was going to lose her. I also started to value my family more”. Worrying for her life, Cher’s father contacted one of their uncles living in Ban Tia Koua You, located between Long Cheng and Sam Thong back in military region two. After two months of living in Pha Kea, Cher’s uncle came and took the family to Ban Tia Koua You. Ban Tia Koua You was located at the bottom of Skyline one base, an army base located on a hill. It was also closer to their old village, and if the communists did

26 Cher Her, interview by Khong Meng Her, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
27 Ibid
leave then they would be able to return to their old house, since their crops and animals were still there. They decided to stay there for the time being to wait out the war.

Living there was a challenge for the family and other Hmong families since there were not enough supplies to go around. The only supplies they received were from air drops organized by Hmong leader General Vang Pao once a week. Around noon was when the drop was made and people would line up to get their rations. The drop contained ramen noodles, canned foods, and rice (each drop containing about three hundred bags of rice). Adults would get three scoops of rice and the kids would only get one scoop one scoop equaled two hand full. Cher remembered one of the drops missed the landing area and ended up landing on a horse killed it. Another one fell on a Laotian woman, the impact of the drop crushed her. In 1971, after multiple attempts, the communist succeeded in taking over Skyline one base. Cher’s family moved to a small village called Phu Kha, located in Lima site 737 within military zone two. When they arrived at Phu Kha, Cher was about twelve years told. He attended school with the Hmong kids in the village. Cher learned his first English lesson from a cousin of his who went to school in Vientiane. However the English lessons he learned were military terms. For example, giving coordinates in the radio to pilots about their missions and landing zones.

When Cher was Fifteen years old, in May of 1975, America lost the Vietnam War, they began to pull their soldiers out from Vietnam and Laos, and retreated. With the Americans gone and no one to supply the Hmong they had to find ways of surviving on their own. General Vang Pao called together a meeting with his high ranking officers and talked about their options in staying or leaving. Some wanted to leave, but did not have anywhere else to go. The

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28 Ibid
29 Ibid
30 Lima sites are separated section within military regions. For more information see Hamilton’s Tragic Mountains.
Americans repeatedly told the Hmong that their courageous efforts in the fight against communism would be acknowledged but in the end, the Americans told the Hmong they had to leave their homelands.\textsuperscript{32} Filled with anger and sadness these men did not know what to do anymore. At the end of the meeting, it was decided Vang Pao and his people will leave Laos to Thailand. The Lao government agreed to give Vang Pao three days to evacuate along with his high officials from Long Cheng.\textsuperscript{33}

After this meeting, word spread amongst the people and villages that they have lost the war and they were taking Vang Pao and his people to Thailand by air in Long Cheng. In order to follow their leader they would have to leave soon since the evacuation lasted only three days. \textsuperscript{34} “At first we heard it was only for the high ranked officers and their family, but after the second day, people said it was open for anyone, so we got ready”. Words of this spread throughout the villages, Cher’s father decided the family would go to Long Cheng also. Early morning on the third day of the evacuations, Cher’s family packed and started their way towards Long Cheng. As they walked to Long Cheng, people from different villages joined them. Villages after villages continued to merge with the migrating group and soon there were about thousands of people who walked to Long Cheng. When Cher and his family arrived to Long Cheng, they saw that it was a runway filled with numerous Hmong people. Cher remembered the scene resembling thousands of ants all over an ant hill, all you saw were people next to each other; everyone pushed towards the plane. \textsuperscript{35} “I was scared, I wanted to go back to our village because there were thousands of people and I questioned how we were going to get on the airplanes. My

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 341
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 342.
\textsuperscript{34} Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid
father told us not to worry and pushed us forward”. As Cher and his family walked towards the runway, Cher saw people shooting each other and people with military trucks plowed through the crowd to get themselves and their family onto the plane. As the plane took off and was in midair, Cher saw a Hmong woman who tried to climb onto the plane and was thrown out by those inside it. She fell onto the ground and was taken to a hospital.

The evacuation of Long Cheng was chaotic and everyone fought for their own survival. As mentioned in Hamilton-Merritt’s book, “soldiers with guns threatened civilians, explaining that this plan was for them and their families”. Coyote the pilot of the last flight explained what happened on his last trip to Long Cheng. “As soon as I stopped, the fastest, strongest, and those with guns rushed the plane. Colonels with weapons were shouting, “This plane is mine!””. For more on the evacuation of Long Cheng, see Hamilton-Merritt, Tragic Mountains, page 341-351.

With that plane being the last one of the evacuation, Cher’s family headed back to their village and lived with the communist. However once they got back to Phu Kha, General Vang Pao showed up at their village in his USAID helicopter. Cher remember Vang Pao told the village chief that, “-now I am going to leave you all, our country is done, but I have two options for you all: option one- if you stay, when the communist come, carry their flag and hate me, join them, so they will accept you. Option two- if you follow me to Thailand then find your own way to Thailand, across the Mekong. I already talked with the Thai King and they are happy to help me receive you all. If you guys make it across the river, they will transport you guys to the border police station. Once you guys arrive there, they will feed you guys and you guys will see

36 Ibid
39 Ibid, 349.
me again. When you guys meet up with me then we will love each other again and then we will come back together”.

As Vang Pao finished his speech, the helicopter pilot signaled to go and with Vang Pao’s back turned, he climbed unto the Helicopter and left to Thailand. After a week, Cher’s father decided they would follow their leader since they did not want to be under communist law.

While they traveled to Thailand, Cher and his family traveled with thousands of other Hmong people. They walked during the day and slept on the side of the road or in the jungle during the night. When they arrived at the bridge in Hin Heup, they were stopped by Pathet Lao soldiers at the checkpoint. They were told not to cross and to return to their villages. Everyone on that march decided to turn back to regroup and think about how they were planning to cross. Their strategy was to stick together no matter what and to cross the bridge the next day. Once the sun rose the next day, everyone went back to the bridge. Again they were told to not cross and to turn back, but this time the Hmong did not turn back and pushed through the first checkpoint. As everyone on the bridge headed towards the second checkpoint on the other side of the bridge, the soldiers lined up and took aim; hundreds of people on the bridge were killed. Cher and his family turned back and retreated. As they retreated the soldiers followed and killed those who were in the way. After retreating about two miles, they regrouped and talk about what to do next. While regrouping a truck driver came from the direction of the bridge, the

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40 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
42 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
44 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
Hmong people asked “how he got across all of those dead bodies” and his reply was, “the soldiers were throwing the bodies off the bridge into the river”.

Cher’s family retreated back to a city known as Nasue or Lima site 272. They knew if they were to cross Hin Heup again by foot they would be shot, so they returned home and applied for a pass to travel through the check points to Vientiane. In another aspect it was to obtain permission from the Laos government to go visit Vientiane. In order for them to get permission they had to go to the city hall and apply for one. During the interview at city hall, Cher’s father was asked why his family wanted to go to Vientiane. He said it was for tourist purposes, to visit the capital for fun. Cher thinks that the government knew why they were going, but they agreed on the pass anyways since the Hmong were paying them money, 100,000 kips (about 200 U.S. dollars) for one adult and 80,000 kips (about 160 U.S. dollars) for one non adult. After they had paid for their passes and obtained permission to travel to Vientiane, they had to hire a driver. The driver also charged them about the same amount for each member. If they paid the driver the right amount then when the soldiers at the checkpoints stop the car, the driver would take care of everything and make sure they could proceed; however, if they did not pay the right amount to the driver then the driver would say nothing to the soldiers and let them deal with everything themselves.

When Cher and his family reached Vientiane, they hid at a brothel and waited for one of their cousins who lived in Vientiane to find people to take them across the Mekong River. The next day the cousin came and told them he found someone to take them across the river. When the city was quiet and the communist soldiers were not out on patrol, the drivers came to pick

46 Ibid
48 Ibid
49 Ibid
49 Kips is the Lao currency and 1000 kips is equal to about 2 U.S. dollars.
them up.\textsuperscript{50} Before departure, the family gathered and decided they were going to split the family since they did not want to travel in a big pack and draw attention. They decided that the oldest son would go with his wife, the next two oldest sons would go together, and Cher and the oldest daughter Pa, along with her child would go together. The rest would go with the father and mother. Cher’s father turned to Pa and Cher and told them to think they were orphans and had no one else. And for later on when she passes away in the future; Cher was to attend her funeral, so it can complete certain steps and procedures in a traditional Hmong funeral. If Cher passes away then for Pa to do the same. If by chance they meet up again then they will love each other again, but if they do not then for them to follow his instructions. “I cried since I did not want to leave my parents behind, my mother and father cried and patted my head. I took into account that I was an orphan already and cried. Every time I saw an elder I cried and when I ate I cried. I cried because I might die and not get to be with my parents or my parents might die and no one is going to take care of me”\textsuperscript{51}. They all said their goodbyes, unsure of who would make it, they all hoped for the best. Cher and his sister headed out to the Mekong River.

When Cher and Pa got to the side of the river, they boarded a boat that was waiting for them. They paid the helmsman to bring them across the river. As they crossed the river, the helmsman did not start the engine until they were halfway across, so the noise will not alert the Pathet Lao soldiers. They laid low and the helmsman quietly used a paddle to get the boat halfway across the river then started the trolling motor and made a fast run for Thailand.\textsuperscript{52} They finally crossed the Mekong River, the helmsman dropped Cher and Pa with her daughter off in the bushes along the side of the river, so no one would see them. From there Cher, Pa, and her daughter Chao walked to the nearest village and asked to see the village chief. They met the

\textsuperscript{50} Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
\textsuperscript{51} Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid
village chief and asked if he could take them to a refugee camp. The village chief said he would drop Cher and Pa off at the nearest refugee camp, but it was two hundred baht per person.\textsuperscript{53} They agreed and paid the Thai village chief and was taken to the nearest refugee camp the next day. They were sent to the Thai border patrol station in Nong Khai which was roughly twenty minutes away.

\textbf{Fences}

When Cher arrived at Nong Khai, he was reunited with his older siblings and the only family members that had not arrived yet was their father, mother, and younger siblings. They waited, but saw no signs of them. Finally one of their aunts who just arrived in the camp told them that she and Cher’s father came together with the same group, but they were caught and taken away by the Pathet Lao soldiers.\textsuperscript{54} The whole family grieved over what to do to help their parents. The following morning Cher’s parents and the rest of the family made it to Nong Khai. Cher’s father told Cher and others that the Pathet Laos soldiers let them go since he was old and brought them across the river.

Within the refugee camps, there were many issues that surfaced while the Hmong were there. Sanitation was an issue due to the growing population within the camps, disease and sickness was uncontrolled, there was a scarcity on food and supply so malnutrition was common especially amongst the children.\textsuperscript{55} There were some Thai that were hostile to the Hmong outside of the camp and within. The rules were extremely strict in some camps and varied among other

\textsuperscript{53} Baht is the Thai currency and one baht was about 25 U.S. dollars during the 90s.
\textsuperscript{54} Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
camps, some were fenced while some were not. There were many Hmong who were heavily stressed and depressed about their situation, some even committed suicide.\(^{56}\)

Living inside Nong Khai the living conditions were terrible. They lived in long barracks and households were separated by blankets to mark the areas given to them by the camp administers. Numerous people died every day from chickenpox and diarrhea. They were not allowed to go outside the camp unless it was to the market which was a block away or to fetch water in the morning when the water trucks came. When they left the camps to go out into the market, they would usually get robbed or beaten since they sometimes wore jewelries in the camp like they did in their villages back in Laos. Like many other Hmong men, Cher started to learn Kung Fu in Nong Khai to protect himself or his family when going out the camp to the market. Not only mistreatment was seen outside the camp, but also within; there were guards who threatened them and stole from them.\(^{57}\) After living in Nong Khai for about a year, the family wanted to go to a different camp, but were not allowed to since the government was building a new camp across from Nong Khai. However the new camp was going to be built on top a cemetery, so Cher and his family did not want to move there.

In April 1976, Cher and the family decided to sneak out of Nong Khai’s refugee camp and go to Loei province where Ban Vinai was located.\(^{58}\) The family went to the market and hired a taxi driver to drive them to Ban Vinai in the morning. The family decided to split up into smaller groups again just like when they left Laos to come to Thailand. Once morning lit the sky and people lined up to fetch water outside the camp, Cher and Pa secretly placed their belongings near the fence within the camp. It was an area near the taxi’s meeting spot. The fences that surrounded the camp were only barbwires, which made it easy to reach through and to grab their

\(^{56}\) Ibid, 69-70.
\(^{57}\) Ibid
\(^{58}\) Ibid
belongings. Cher and Pa walked as if they were going to fetch water in the morning like everyone else. After getting out the gate, they walked to the meeting spot and quickly reached through the barbwire fence to grab their things. As they drove to Ban Vinai, they avoided all the big roads, since there were Thai patrols in search of refugees who snuck out of the camps. During the taxi ride, Cher recalled not being as scared as he was when they first split since this time his parents were not far away and they knew they would meet again at Ban Vinai.59

Upon their arrival at Ban Vinai, the taxi driver dropped them off near the jungle next to the camp. Since the camp was open and people were going in and out freely, Cher and Pa walked in with the others. During the first week of their arrival in Ban Vinai, Cher lived with some of their in-laws. Cher and Pa had not yet register with the camp since they were waiting on the rest of the family to arrive to be registered under the same household. “After a week, I started to cry because we have not registered yet and could not get any food when they distributed it. Since we could not get any rations, we had to share with our in-laws. However, they would complain and said things like, no more food and no name to eat, so why are you eating so much when you do not have a name to eat”.60 Cher did not know how to response back but cried and think, “How come my parents are not dead yet and people are treating me like a dog. I cried a lot and went around to my friends to visit them and eat. I would pretend like I was not hungry when they asked me to eat, but I was in fact hungry”.61 After three weeks, Cher’s whole family got to Ban Vinai. “When my parents got there, we registered and got two section of the long house”.62 One section was about 10 feet by 20 feet. They lived in Center 4, quarter 3, building 2, room number

59 Ibid
60 Ibid
61 Ibid
62 Ibid
one and two. Cher, two of his older brother, his sister-in-law lived in section one and his parents
along with the rest of the kids lived in section two. There was ten section in each long house.63

Cher was nineteen years old when he arrived in Ban Vinai. He realized it was a difficult
time for the family and people looked down on his father. He decided to continue his education,
so he can challenge the rich and educated. Cher attended school to learn basic English and
applied for a position at the hospital as a translator. In 1979 while attending school, Cher also
taught English to people in the camp. Working in the hospital, Cher wanted to come to America
because of the two doctors, Dr. Jim (who was Canadian) and Dr. Johnathan Icegreen, an
American dentist from San Francisco.64 Both of the doctor told him to come to America, so he
could continue his education and become a doctor. “I decided to follow what the doctors told me,
but I wanted to get marry first, so she can help take care of me when I get sick and my parents
can see her before I leave.”65 In 1980, while translating for a sick patient, Cher met Oa the
patient. She was sick and came into the hospital to get an examination. After she left, Cher
started to see her outside of work and got married to Oa in February 1980.

After getting marry to Oa, Cher changed his mind about coming to America obtained
dental training from Dr. Icegreen in 1980. He completed his dental training in 1981 and became
a dentist. In 1989 Cher applied to work as a team leader at the Join Voluntary Agency (JVA).
This program helped process Hmong refugee resettlement outside Thailand.66 “I taught English
at 6 in the morning to 8 then went to work at 8:30 till 4:30”.67 In 1988 Cher met a man by the
name of Father Brady and worked with him to teach English to the Hmong.68 “He asked me if I

63 Ibid
64 Ibid
65 Ibid
66 Ibid
67 Ibid
68 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
wanted to go to France or America to get a better education, but since I had a family I did not want to.\textsuperscript{69} A few months later, news came about the closing of the refugee camp. There was only two option for refugee people at this point, to go back to Laos or to register for resettlement in a new country.

\textsuperscript{69} Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
CERTIFICATE OF TRAINING

This is to certify that [Name] of Ban Vinai Refugee Camp has satisfactorily completed 1 year of basic training in Dentistry conducted at Ban Vinai Hospital on 1st November 1980 through 30th November 1981.

World Vision

Provincial Health Officer

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES U.S.C.C.

CERTIFICATE OF TRAINING

This is to certify that [Name] of Ban Vinai Refugee Camp has satisfactorily completed twenty-six weeks of basic training in Dentistry conducted at CRS Dental Clinic on 1st July 1982 through 30th December 1982.

Teaching Officer

CRS Medical Coordinator
March 25, 1985

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Mr. HER CHER

has worked with Catholic Relief Services-USCC
from NOVEMBER 11, 1980 to MARCH 28, 1985
providing dental services to the Hmong people
in Ban Vinni.

Dr. Teera Thanya-Udom
Dental Project Coordinator

John R. Donahue
Program Director
(Left to right)

Leslie, Cher Her, Sean Sai, Nancy Walker
Within the camp it brought challenges to many of the Hmong men, it was a dramatic change to the lives they once had in Laos. For many of the men, there was little for them to do. The only way the Hmong men were able to find work was if it were permitted by the camp authorities and allowed. Some were probably able to go out and work for the Thai on their farms for roughly two-five baht; while some snuck out to find work for money. Sometimes when they made two or three baht, it would just be enough for a bowl of noodles and broth for a family. There was no way for them to garden or raise animals, to provide for their families within the camps, especially since many of them were unemployed and at the mercy of the camp authorities. Life for the parents changed too, they were like children, they were utterly powerless, and they had no control in their families or life anymore.\(^70\)

There were trucks filled with food that came into the camps twice a month. Sometimes they would not even show up. The food that they rationed out would be one bowlful per family member in each household. The bigger the family, the bigger the ration of food was given; the smaller the family, the smaller the ration of food that were given out.\(^71\) Water was a scarcity also, there was a limit to how much you can get per family. There was a scheduled time for each building to go get water and you can only get water during that specific time. When it came to goods being sold within the camp and outside the fences of the camp; some camps only allowed permission to some Thai vendors to sell goods within the camps.\(^72\) The Thai vendors that were approved would overcharge the Hmong. Sometimes the Hmong would sneak outside of the camps just to go buy goods from the outside Thai vendors who sold products such as vegetables,

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\(^70\) Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
chickens, and produce at a cheaper price. If you got caught buying from the outside illegally you were arrested and thrown into jail too.

Around seven in the early morning, there would be a song that was played, during this time the Hmong had to get up and stop whatever they were doing. They had to stand and salute the Thai flag and sing their anthems. Every Hmong had to do it, even the children; if the children did not stand still and sing the Thai songs the parents would be arrested too.

The Hmong people had to carry ID cards to go in and out of the camps. If they did not have them, they would be in trouble. The children did not need any, if they slipped through the gates, the guards would chase after them but then they would change their minds and just say, “Oh he’s just a kid. He’ll come back.” The guards did not really do anything to you if you were a child without ID. Ban Vinai, was one of the camps that were not strict, it was flexible; they allowed the Hmong to go in and out of the camp, since it was not fenced either. Some Hmong found opportunities and jobs within and outside of the camp.

Many of the refugees saw the camps as a jail. They were usually fenced in, surrounded by barb wire and sometimes bamboo thickets and stalks. They were not allowed to go out without permission or permit. There would be hundreds of Hmong that would line up by the gate just to get permission to go out and buy food. Most of them did not even have money. For those that would sneak out and get caught, they were usually arrested, beaten, or killed. You could not even peek out of the fences at other camps. If you were caught by the guards while you peeked beyond the bamboo stalks or wires, you could potentially be killed on the spot or thrown to jail.

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74 Ibid, 73-75.
75 Ibid, 73-75.
76 Ibid, 71.
Hmong men were depressed and filled with anguish due to the loss of their manhood. They cried since they men, they were not free and able to travel anymore, they would get beat or kill. In 1978 women did not value men as much anymore since they cannot provide for the family. Their money has all been lost due to travel. They ran out of ideas on how to live and depended on the supplies from the U.N. only. Hmong men began to do women’s chores. They begged the women for financial support by making paj ntaub (embroidery cloth) to sell to foreigners or send it to America to have their cousins sell them and send the money back to make income to support the family. Hmong men lost all their manhood at the camps. Women a strong independent role in place of the men in their families and the men took on the less supportive role.

This dramatic change in gender role and power started when the Hmong women were introduced to relief workers. They taught the women that they could earn money through their needlework and stitchery. This experience created an independent seed in some women. While the men were unemployed and there was little to do, they felt useless to their families while the women made most of the income by making stitchery and needlework to sell. Back in Laos, the men used to disregard the women’s capability to do anything special, and now that the women are able to make income, the men are in shock to their new earning power.

The lives of Hmong men were taken apart since they could no longer be the sole supportive provider for the family, so their wives would leave them for someone better. Many of the men who used to be soldiers lost limbs or were incapable of doing anything (due to injuries during their escape from Laos or fight against communists) without the aid of their children or

77 Ger Vang, interview by author, Brooklyn Center, MN, October 4, 2013.
78 Ibid.
79 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
wife. This caused harm to their pride and ego as an important independent male figure in the family. At the same time those Hmong men who were rich took advantage of this situation for their own interests too; some married multiple wives.  

**Orange Buses**

As Ban Vinai started to close down Cher’s oldest brother and oldest sister signed for resettlement in America and left the family. Cher and the others were unsure of what they wanted and were transferred to Chiang Kham refugee camp. While living in Chiang Kham, Cher continued to work with the JVA in that camp and gave out English lessons. Chiang Kham was not like Ban Vinai, they had strict rules. The camps had tall fences and not with just barbwire this time, but also with wooden boards so they cannot escape. Curfew was about ten p.m. and anyone caught outside their home after that time would get beat. They had to shut off their lights and go to bed. Compared to Ban Vinai, Chiang Kham was like a prison or cage for animals.

In June of 1990, Cher decided he would leave Thailand with Oa and his children to America. Cher’s father did not want to leave nor for Cher to leave the family behind. Cher’s father told him that once they get to America they will not be able to garden and live like they did in Laos and soon the Hmong people will lose their identity and disappear. Cher did not want to leave, but his wife Oa insisted for them to go so their future will not be lived in poverty. Cher’s older sister and brother from America sent a cassette tape back to the family, saying America is great the rest of the family should join. The American is supporting them and they get money every other week, and they get to go to school for free. Everything on the tape about America sounded like good news only and urged Cher to leave to America.

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81 Ger Vang, interview by author, Brooklyn Center, MN, October 4, 2013.
82 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, Wi, September 11, 2013.
83 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, Wi, September 11, 2013.
Not wanting to go back to Laos, Cher applied for resettlement through JVA. They agreed and told Cher they would send him to Phanat Nikhom and have him work there for the time being. Cher told his father he was leaving Thailand and would go to America to follow his older siblings. When Cher’s father heard this, he cried. Cher’s father told his sons to kill him and bury him before they leave him alone, so he does not have to see them off and miss them.84 In June of 1990 JVA gave Cher, Oa, and their kids the permission to go to Phanat Nikhom, which was south of Bangkok. Early in the morning they packed and got ready. Cher’s father tried to convince him to stay again and he wanted to, but did not want to be sent back to Laos, so he did not stay. Cher’s father had nothing else to say to him, but agreed and said as long as Oa is with him then it was fine.

Walking towards the orange buses with white stripes on the side, Cher felt like he was in Vientiane again, leaving his parents behind and going ahead to Thailand, but this time it was farther away and this time he did not know when they would all meet again.85 “When I left the house my father cried. My father cried and did not want to open his eyes to see one of his son leave him behind. He did not want to look because he said it is too far, past the sun and one day when he died, there will be no one there to take care of him. Also if I get into any kind of trouble he will not be there for me, so he did not want to see me leave”.86 Cher’s mother sent him and his family to the bus alone. His mother packed him a pack of lunch with a bag of paj ntaub (embroidery cloth). At the bus stop Cher’s mother looked at him and said, she and his father are both old and Cher is leaving them both behind. He is going far away and if one day she or his father pass away Cher will not see them, so keep her lunch and paj ntaub as a gift to let him know she is still with him and will always love him. The paj ntaub is a symbol of her love and in

84 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
85 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
86 Ibid
the future if Cher is no longer in this world, for him to wear the clothes she gave him, so he can go see them.⁸⁷

As Cher and his family got onto the orange bus, Cher saw that every Hmong person on the bus were in tears and holding hands with their family members. Even when the bus left many still cried. Since the Hmong peoples’ love for each other was deep and many were leaving family members behind it was not a happy ending. Many fainted from crying as the bus drove off slowly leaving nothing but tire tracks on the dirt road. In his whole life Cher had only seen this happened to the Hmong people.

Leaving Vinai to Chiang Kham, Hmong men were not worry and sad since going there meant seeing more Hmong relatives and being indulged into the same environment again. Their name, pride, and reputation was still with them. From Chiang Kham to Phanat Nikhom, they were leaving their family, land, and loved ones behind. At the final transit center to Bangkok airport, the Hmong men cried since they were leaving forever and it felt as though they were the dead leaving their land and families behind.⁸⁸ The respect and achievements they earned were left behind in Thailand.

At the refugee camp, Phanat Nikhom, they taught English to the Hmong who were going to be transitioned into the US. They were taught rules that the Americans had to follow. They showed videos about Hmong who had arrived first who knew nothing about using the bathroom, stove, buying food, or spending money.⁸⁹ In Phanat Nikhom, Cher became an assistance English teacher for consortiums who prepared the Hmong to go to America. After living in Phanat Nikhom for four months, he was offered to work permanently with JVA. Cher got his own office

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⁸⁷ Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
⁸⁸ Ger Vang, interview by author, Brooklyn Center, MN, October 4, 2013.
and would not be transferred around anymore. In June 1993, he was sponsored by his older sister Pa and her husband in America; and came to Appleton, Wisconsin.  

When the plane took off into the air, they turned and looked back at Bangkok and cried since they were leaving behind the land they were born into, loved ones, and an identity behind. They also saw their reputation/manhood, and ranks disappear like the sun setting slowly. They cried because their manhood slowly diminished in front of them. There was not going to be any acknowledgement towards them as men anymore. From the moment we left, our future as Hmong men changed into being kids living under other people’s rules, following them, and becoming dependent.  

“Therefore coming to America, we are sad, and we hear of man killing themselves because of stress”. They lost everything, dying was ok since they had no land, pride, or manhood left with them. “We miss our land since we miss equal treatment and that is one of the main reason why Hmong men today are stress because they miss their land and families.” Hmong men will never be treated the same again as they board this plane and leave for a new beginning.

Conclusion

Following the life of Cher Her, it showed the hardships these Hmong Lao men had gone through, with the flight from Laos to Thailand then from the refugee camps, into the transition coming to America. Although Hmong history revolved around these men being a warrior figure, Cher was not a soldier. However, it does not mean he did not suffer from the war for it is those who are the civilians who suffered the most from this war. Not many people think about Hmong

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90 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
91 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
92 Cher Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, September 11, 2013.
93 Neng Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, WI, October 26, 2013.
94 Ger Vang, interview by author, Brooklyn Center, MN, October 4, 2013.
95 Ibid.
men thorough the lens of a civilians leaving their homeland and loved ones behind. Not only did Cher leave behind his parents, but thousand also did the same. Many Hmong people left those they loved the most behind during this state of war. Husbands left their wife behind, children left parents, parents left children, brothers left one another, and sisters left each other. It was a time of survival and everyone for themselves.

Making the journey across the Mekong River into Thailand was a new start for these men and their families. With the assumption of their safety and care being tended to, they were fenced in and were not allowed to enjoy the land like they did in Laos. They were robbed, beaten, and even killed in front of their loved ones. Many rape cases happened in the camps, where the husband or boyfriend would get beaten and forced to watch Thai officials mistreat their family or raped their loved ones. Although the camp was a new start for the Hmong, this new world for the men was losing their life. Their ranks and achievements were of no importance and they were told to go back to Laos if they brought up their ranks in the camps. Many thought the life in the camps were not bad and would live there forever, but eventually it closed down and forced them to make another choice for their lives, resettlement in Laos or in another country.

Not knowing what awaits them and hearing from relatives of how great rich the outside world was, Hmong men registered themselves or with their family to leave Thailand. Since life and living conditions in the camps were filled with anguish and poverty, many thought it would be a better choice to leave. As these Hmong men reached the final transition camp, Phanat Nikhom, western ideals were taught to them to ready them for their new lives in America. Many of the men lost their power, when women were introduce to women’s right. Women told their husband they would come to America and marry two husbands as the men had once done to them in their marriage. The role of women use to be inferior compared to their husband, but now
women had the chance to claim independence and an identity for themselves. After learning western customs, these men worried about their lives since they would no longer be running the family anymore. Women left behind their traditions and adopted towards western traditions, so they can rise from the oppression of men. As time came closer to go to America, many Hmong men knew their lives were over and in the new world; they would become dependent on others for support and help.

As the older Hmong generation is dying out and the newer generation is assimilating into a new society, Hmong youth no longer find it useful to hold onto such a long and difficult history that is not written down. Has Cher’s father’s prediction of Hmong losing themselves in America coming true? When Hmong history is told, it starts only about the war and the refugees that come to America. This causes people to think there is only one history to the Hmong and all their stories are the same. Many scholars might agree that it is not worth being retold and everything has been cover already. Many scholars believe their work has done enough and their ties with others have allowed them to learn things about the Hmong, but being of Hmong decent, I know for a fact that there are still many stories that would expand on Hmong history by exploring the past and learning about old stories.

Although every Hmong Lao may have the same context to their stories, their lives are different and how they see the world from their point of view will help shape history. Therefore exploring the same topics in Hmong history is worthwhile and should not be seen as something that has already been covered. History was always written by the victorious and how they want the world to remember them, but here are the stories of those who did not emerge as victorious in the war, but were survivals and now their stories will be told to the world even if it covers the same time period.
Cher’s life was a wonderful story to listen to and all the struggles he has been though showed what a Hmong man had gone through during this time period. Like many other Hmong men, his pride and manhood was demolished as he grew up in the camps and came to America, but he did it for his children’s future. Cher is not only one of my interviewees, but also someone who is very dear to me, my father, and a huge influence to me enabling me to pursue in what I do. For what these men had done for their country and for their families, I am choosing to finish with a poem I received awhile back at a conference. This poem shares the lives the Hmong people and Hmong men encountered upon their arrival in America.

**Dialogue with America**

*(For Z.D.T)*

I am Hmong.

My people lived free in the mountains of Laos.

In America I asked for a job.

I heard you say:

“Hey, here’s another of them Vi-et-man-ese.”

I was a soldier.

The American government supplied our “Secret Army.”

I rescued American pilots downed in the jungle.

I was told:

“It’s our policy to hire U.S. citizens.”

I was a blacksmith.

In my forge I shaped knives, hoes, and shovels.

I built the forge and the bellows myself.
You said to me:

“We only need people with experience.”

I was a farmer

We grew rice and raised pigs, cows, and chickens.

“Can you help us get land to grow food on?”

You answered:

“The welfare office is in charge of you people.”

I’m forty-two years old

Since age twelve I’ve been farmer, blacksmith and soldier.

My labor supported my family.

You told me:

“We want young people, able to work.”

I lost my infant daughter.

Communists poisoned the salt for our food.

Her bones turned to gelatin, and she died.

I overheard you:

“They just came here for the hand-outs, you know.”

I am Hmong.

I have skilled hands and I know what hard work is.

I can learn any job you can show me.

You laughed:

“Hire you? You can’t speak English.”\(^{96}\)

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\(^{96}\) Downing, *Dialogue with American (For Z.D.T.)*, poem, lines 1-35.
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