

**A History of Displacement and Oppression:
US Refugee Policy and its Effects on Hmong Resettlement**

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Abstract

This paper discusses the US refugee policies that played a key role in refugee and immigration policy in the United States, especially on the Hmong who were resettled here after the Vietnam War. Additionally, this paper will briefly cover the complicated history of the Hmong, how they got to Southeast Asia, their involvement in the Vietnam (particularly the Secret War in Laos) and their eventual resettlement in the United States. Through their history and through these refugee and immigration policies we see how it has shaped the lives of immigrants and refugees who have come to the United States, especially on Hmong refugees.

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Introduction

The Mekong River had taken many lives of fleeing Hmong who were attempting to flee war-torn Laos. Their goal, in crossing the Mekong, was to seek asylum in the neighboring country of Thailand from the incoming communist Pathet Lao. However, even if they made it across, what were the chances your family would even survive? However, with the imminent persecution by the Pathet Lao, crossing the River was better than staying behind and, most likely, killed for allying with the Americans during the Vietnam War. From the Laotian side of the Mekong, a boat came to pick up the family where they left, with other small groups, to Thai refugee camps. Yet, as it would be, “My family spent the first two years of my life trying to escape the war, and the next five starving in a refugee camp.”¹ This account and story by Cy Thao, a survivor of the Pathet Lao persecution of the Hmong, is one of many journeys Hmong refugee endured to make it to the US. In their long journey here, the Hmong faced many hardships in the form of persecution in their long-winded history. From their centuries of abuse by the Chinese, to the continued persecution by the French and by various groups in Southeast Asia in the mid-twentieth century, the Hmong refugees would somehow make it to the United States only to be met with even more hardships in the form of various social issues.

In examining the issues the Hmong people have faced in the United States, you have to also analyze the Refugee Act of 1980. Although the Act had the positive effect of granting the Hmong, and other incoming refugees, a new life in the US there were also many negative effects

¹ Miss McDonald, “Story Painter: Cy Thao and the Hmong Experience,” *Appleseeds* 8, no. 8 (2006): 24, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://web-a-ebSCOhost-com.proxy.uwec.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=62305de2-6e6a-4665-9eb0-5bd155bfa1d7%40sdc-v-sessmgr06&bdata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPWlwLHVpZCZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=20789414&db=prh>

of the subsequent resettlement. The Refugee Act executed many policies that helped with resettlement of in the United States while helping to train refugees in language-learning and assimilation into the United States populace. However, the Refugee Act was also plagued with issues of disorganization, limited funding, and disparagement. Additionally, effects of the Refugee Act on the Hmong can be seen in the rising numbers of opponents towards refugee resettlement (in the years since its enactment) and the confusion of what exactly a refugee is. Also, the Refugee Act puts into perspective the various issues of acculturation, assimilation, and adaptation in the US following resettlement.

Historiography

For thousands of years, the Hmong people have resettled numerous times throughout history. Mostly an agrarian group of people whose group structure consists of more than ten clans, they first appeared in Chinese history—known by the Chinese as “Miao” (savage)—around early 400 BC, settling near the Yellow River of China. They were considered “barbaric” ethnic people and inferior due to their refusal to assimilate to Chinese culture and their, “pale skin and Caucasian features.”² The Miao (considered the original ancestors of the Hmong) were referenced as far back as the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) as a people who repeatedly fought for independence against Chinese rule. It was in China where they would spend the majority of their lives fighting for independence from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) all the

² Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat: The Hmong & America's Secret War in Laos* (Spokane, WA: Washington University Press, 2000), 24.

Thailand was the only member of SEATO in the Southeast Asian region (the other members were Australia, Britain, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, and the Philippines) since Laos and Cambodia were off limits due to the military defense alliance—which was negotiated during the 1954 Geneva Accords. The US had hoped to negate this alliance with SEATO.⁵

Not long after the creation of SEATO, President Johnson ordered airstrikes, in the late summer of 1964, against the NVA for retaliation against the alleged NVA firings upon the US American destroyer *Maddox*. This would become known as the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, since it occurred in the Gulf of Tonkin near the Southeast Asian coast. The aftermath of this event spurred Congress to pass the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution which effectively granted President Johnson unlimited power in the affairs of Southeast Asia and thus began the Vietnam War.⁶ The Vietnam War effort would mark the first time the US government would encounter the Hmong. Particularly, the Hmong feared that their lives would be once again be under the rule of an oppressive government, the communist NVA. The Hmong felt they had no choice but to fight alongside the US. Establishing a CIA and Hmong base in Long Chieng (located in northern Laos) with the famed Hmong General Vang Pao, the US and the Hmong were determined to defeat the NVA and communist Vietnamese in South Vietnam (who were known the Vietcong).⁷ The war effort in Laos would be named the Secret War. Though “war” was in its name, the Secret War was a different kind, it was a proxy war.⁸ This meant that the United States—though deploying CIA agents to help train the Hmong in guerilla warfare against the communist Pathet

⁵ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 126.

⁶ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the Secret Wars for Laos, 1942-1992* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 132.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 183.

Lao party—did not actually deploy ground troops or were directly involved in the war effort. Proxy wars usually mean instigating conflict between two parties while working in the background of supporting another. This was the case with the conflict between the Royal Lao Army, who were helped by the Hmong (although the Hmong were considered a separate militia)⁹ with both being backed by the US government. The other warring party was the communist Pathet Lao. By the end of 1957, Operation Momentum, a program initiated to train Hmong soldiers, armed a total of about five thousand Hmong troops ready to join the conflict in 1964.

Unfortunately, as valiant as Vang Pao and his Hmong army's efforts were, it would not last long. General Ho Nguyen Giap (the military commander of the NVA) would implement the pivotal 1968 Tet Offensive (named after its launch on the Buddhist Tet New Year holiday in Vietnam). Bringing as much artillery from North Vietnam and as many men as possible, they launched surprise attacks on US soldiers, making this one of the largest military campaigns during the Vietnam War. One account of the Tet Offensive ambushes is told by Aderholt, a US pilot, who took up his aircraft to try and defend against the incoming assaults. Attempting to counter with his fighter jet, Aderholt would have some luck in hitting an enemy truck, but his second pass ended up in his fighter jet getting shot down where he would scream over to his comrade over their communications, "I'm going over the side. I'm bailing out!"¹⁰ Towards the end of 1971, the sieging of Long Chieng by the NVA and Pathet Lao began. Defending against heavy shelling and frustrated by lack of air support from the Americans, Vang Pao and his troops were pinned down. Having to defend from all sides, US soldiers, alongside the Hmong, attempted to fend off the enemy as long as possible where Vang Pao would hold onto hope that

⁹ Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay's Wheat*, 182.

¹⁰ Jane Hamilton-Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 179.

air support would eventually arrive. Subsequently, Vang Pao and most of his CIA associates were forced to flee Long Chieng. The incoming Pathet Lao were then able to seize the critical base of operations in Laos. In an account by a Hmong pilot, Yang Pao, he recalls being captured by the Pathet Lao for interrogation, “They interrogated me... ‘what is your rank?’ ‘How many houses did you destroy?’ ‘How many [Laotians] did you kill?’ I remained silent. They tortured me. Still I remained silent.”¹¹ In almost an instant, the US and the CIA pulled their troops and agents, respectively, from Southeast Asia.

With the eventual fall of Saigon, South Vietnam’s capital, to the NVA and Vietcong in 1975, the Vietnam War came to an end (as did the Secret War). After pulling out their troops and CIA agents in Laos, Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State and Security Adviser during the Vietnam War, lamented about leaving Laos, “We have not come all this way in order to betray our friends.”¹² Even though Kissinger’s sympathy for leaving their allies in Laos seemed apparent in his 1973 dinner speech, the truth was that he, and the US government, had no plans in remaining and committing to Laos. Reaffirming non-commitment in Laos, politician William Sullivan, in a closed Senate Hearing, exclaimed that since the Secret War was indeed secret, the US had no formal agreement or obligation to Laos or the Hmong, stating, “They have seen lots of white faces, lots of round eyes, and I don’t believe that their attitudes in dealing with us are disposed upon matters of sentiment or moral obligations.”¹³ The Hmong were now abandoned and on their own. In a war where the Hmong would lose almost a third of their population, it was clear that they would not stand a chance against the Pathet Lao.¹⁴ Those fortunate enough to flee

¹¹ Jane-Hamilton Merritt, *Tragic Mountains*, 288.

¹² Keith Quincy, *Harvesting Pa Chay’s Wheat*, 356.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

the incoming Pathet Lao and NVA fled across the Mekong River into Thailand. It is estimated that about twenty-four thousand entered Thailand in 1979, with another fifteen-thousand joining them in 1980. The Hmong were now refugees of war.

John F. Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants*

Prior to the significant Refugee Act of 1980, there was a pivotal movement by John F. Kennedy. President Kennedy believed that since the United States was already a nation full of immigrants in the past, they should be welcomed to this great and promising land. Reasons for coming to this country included economic opportunity, religious freedom, disasters of nature and to escape governmental persecutions. To give evidence of the latter, Kennedy uses events of the Russian Revolution, Hitler's Germany (as well as Mussolini's tyranny in Italy), and Cuba to highlight fascist and communistic pressures. These oppressive governments brought upon thousands of new people to the United States with different ethnicities from around many regions of the world.¹⁵ With this in mind, Kennedy uses a quote from Harvard Professor, and immigration historian, Oscar Handlin, "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history."¹⁶ Vastly different would the US be if the immigrants who made this land restrictive to newer immigrants, as older immigrants tended to do. With the Quota Law of 1921 and the Immigrant Act of 1924, these two greatly lingered on anti-immigration standards which, in turn, restricted the influx of immigrants

¹⁵ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, Revised and Enlarged ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

into the US.¹⁷ The former legislative law, the very first in the US's history of regulation of immigration, limited the number of incoming immigrants based on a Census count of immigrant people in 1910. Building on that, the Immigrant Act of 1924 greatly reduced the limit of immigrants allowed in the US. For example, a numbers count of immigrants based from the Census count of 1910 now used the Census count of immigrants from 1890 instead, which was about 20% less than 1910's. President Kennedy proposed a new immigration bill that, "should be generous; it should be fair; it should be flexible."¹⁸ This idea of opening up the country to new immigrants had its opponents, especially an era of hostility like the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that was already occurring. Fortunately, Kennedy's ideas resonated with many and the Immigration Act of 1965 did away with the quotas and restrictions of the past and welcomed a flood of thousands of immigrants. This paved the way for the Hmong to enter the US.

¹⁷ Kay Deaux, "A Nation of Immigrants: Living Our Legacy," *Journal of Social Issues* 62, no. 3 (September 2006): 640.

¹⁸ John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, 50.

Committee Hearings on the Refugee Crises

With the United States' pulling out of Vietnam and most of Southeast Asia in 1975, one huge issue remained: what to do with the thousands of refugees in Southeast Asia? To deal with this issue at hand, a legislative committee hearing took place on 1979 to define just exactly what a refugee was as there was massive confusion. A refugee was agreed upon (by the United Nations definition) as:¹⁹

“Any person who is outside any country of his nationality, or in the case of a person having no nationality, is outside any country in which he last habitually resided, and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country because of persecution or well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”¹⁹

To remedy the situation, a bill by Edward Kennedy—who himself a supporter of his brother John's immigration policy—called for an increase in immigrant and refugee people into the United States, annually. Only, there were two specific problems: what programs or decisions should be done with the status of these displaced people and what to do with their due process protections. Highlighting the disorganization and heavy underfunding in the past, Dick Clark, the US Coordinator for Refugee Affairs at the time, helped to rally support for the Refugee Act where he states, “we remain convinced that the Refugee Act is the most appropriate way to provide a comprehensive, long-term policy on the admission and resettlement of refugees in the United States.”²⁰ Since refugee issues were unpredictable in nature, an increase in budget was necessary to deal with the problem. An increase in the budget of the Refugee Assistance Fund

¹⁹ *Refugee Act of 1979: Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the Committee on the Judiciary* HR 2816, US Refugee Act of 1980, 96th Cong., 1st sess., March 14, 1979, 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

was doubled from \$25 million to \$50 million. The responsibility of refugee handling, of which the State Department was responsible for, now fell upon the hands of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) who would then allocate grants to voluntary agencies, willing to take refugees that came in, from all across the United States. HEW would then be required to develop programs for refugee resettlement and provide English speaking classes and job training in overseas refugee camps. Though specific and well intentioned, these policies—and their responsibilities of which were now being allocated to voluntary agencies—were put into place with no knowledge of the general background of the incoming refugees.

The budget was also a huge concern since resettlement programs were not fully realized. Contacting voluntary agencies fell upon the responsibility of HEW, who themselves were not fully organized. Ideally, the State Department would help with the refugee issue, but their hands were already full of fiscal issues of the time. Specifically, the refugees in Southeast Asia, displaced largely by the Vietnam War and the Cambodian Genocide, were looking for refuge. Thailand was a country most fled to in order to seek asylum. Fleeing to the Thai border, many refugees were sent to refugee camps. Though Thailand was cooperative in their handling of the refugees, they were not so willing, however, to keep the refugees, most of whom were involved in the Vietnam War. Not wanting to harm relations with the surrounding Southeast Asian nations, Thailand would only provide momentary refuge if the United States would enact resettlement programs for the displaced people. The Thai refugee camps had a population of over 160,000.²¹ Particularly, those who were in the refugee camps were those who helped, in some way, with the US war effort in the past (many of them being Hmong). By 1976, over 40,000

²¹ *Overview of refugee situation in Southeast Asia: hearing before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs*, S. 643, US Refugee Act of 1980, 98th Cong., 2d sess., April 5, 1984, 21.

refugees were estimated to be residing in refugee camps all over northern and northeastern Thailand alone. Ban Vinai, a refugee camp located in on the northern border of Thailand, was the largest of the camps, but it would later be replaced by Nam Phong (located in the eastern part of Thailand) and Chiang Kham (also located on the northern border of Thailand), all were filled with Hmong, Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees.

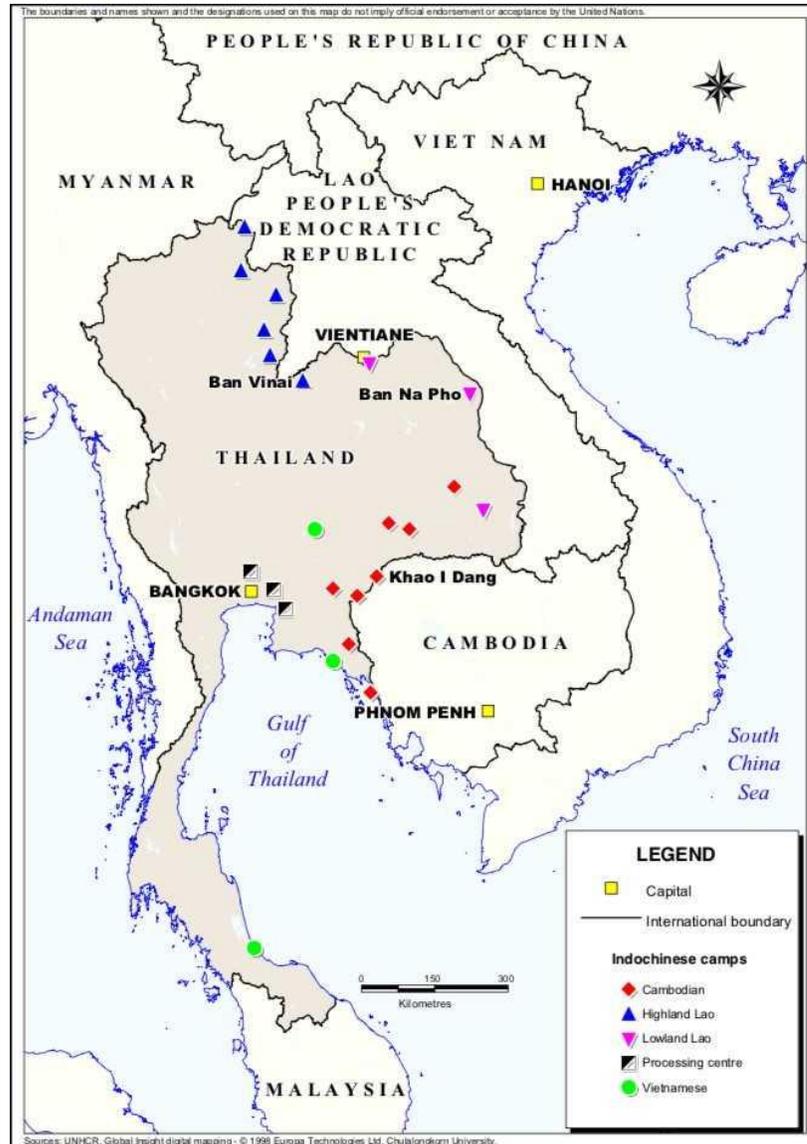


Figure 2: Thailand’s refugee camps during the 1980s-90s, the legend refers to the Hmong as the “Highland Lao.” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/maps/3ae6bb23c/map-unhcr-assisted-laotian-cambodian-vietnamese-refugee-camps-thailand.html>

The Refugee Problem

The resettlement system we see today did not emerge into its eventual form until after World War II. Prior, both immigrants and refugees were aided by voluntary agencies (or “volags”) and their corresponding local constituents.²² Both relied on resources that each, respectively, generated; this meant that there were no government sponsored programs to help displaced people coming into the US and were strictly left to volags. This changed in 1946 when the Corporate Affidavit Program was implemented. Essentially, this Program guaranteed financial aid by volags to refugees coming into the US and also qualified refugees for entrance into the country. This program was so successful that it spawned the Displaced Persons Act of 1948, considered the very first important refugee legislation in the US, the Displaced Persons Act provided agencies with a dependable budget while assigning the responsibilities of resettling refugees to the voluntary agencies and state commissions.²³

The first huge wave of refugees that entered the US were the Hungarians following the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Spurred by Austria’s inability to take in all of the refugees, the Eisenhower administration agreed to take some of the refugees. Numbering at almost 40,000 Hungarian refugees, the resettlement was successful for a few reasons. The aforementioned number of Hungarians was relatively small; many already had next-of-kin upon their arrival, they were white Europeans with few dependents, their arrival was during an era of low unemployment, and their entrance into the US was painted as brave people who were escaping communism’s violent grasp. Federal funding for the Hungarians totaled less than forty dollars

²² Norman L. Zucker, “Refugee Resettlement in the United States: Policy Problems,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 467, no. 1 (1983): 173, accessed, December 12, 2018.

²³ Ibid.

per refugee, a total that came to about \$1.5 million. However, this era of manageable refugees would change in the future heading into the latter twentieth century.²⁴

The era of the 1970s-80s saw a huge number of displaced people, from all over, flood into the US. The biggest of the groups were the Eastern Europeans, Cubans, and Southeast Asian refugees. The latter of the two came in huge and chaotic numbers; Cubans came at almost 2000 a week in 1960 whereas the Southeast Asian refugees flocked in the tens of thousands in the 1970s after the Vietnam War. With the Cuban refugees, volags attempted to stifle the chaos by using private resources, however this would not be enough. With regard to the Cuban refugees, President Kennedy, in December of 1960, forwarded the responsibility of handling the Cubans to HEW.²⁵ This created a program of federally funded assistance to Cuban refugees and helped to enact the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962 which opened the doors for Southeast Asian refugees.

The sheer thousands of displaced people from Southeast Asia forced the US government to create the Interagency Task Force which helped in evacuating and resettling refugees. Despite domestic hostility towards them, Congress was still able to pass the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 which increased federal funding assistance for Southeast Asians, albeit only meant to be a temporary solution. The emergence of other assistance programs, the largest of which specifically targeted assistance programs for the Cubans and Southeast Asian refugees, were likely going to be met with opposition. The US government was well aware of the eventual backlash by state and local governments, as well as the domestic population's concerns of incoming refugees. As a response, the director of the President's Interagency Task Force put out

²⁴ Norman L. Zucker, "Refugee Resettlement in the United States," 173.

²⁵ Ibid., 174.

a message to all fifty states saying, “State and local authorities will suffer no direct fiscal hardship and little indirect hardship from the influx [of refugees].”²⁶ Yet, Congress was still worried about the longstanding fiscal implications of aiding assistance programs for far too long and so the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program (IRAP), created in 1975, was set to expire in 1977. This was not the case, as the IRAP did not cease until 1980 after the Refugee Act was put into law. The IRAP ended up costing over \$1 billion by this point.²⁷ On September 1979, the Refugee Act was adopted by the Senate and set to be voted upon. By a result of 85-0, the bill was finally passed unanimously with, seemingly, no sort of objection by either political parties.²⁸ On March 17, 1980, President Carter signed the bill into law, marking one of the most important laws of legislation in recent decades.

The Refugee Act of 1980

Building upon the earlier mentioned Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the Refugee Act was crucial for one main reason: recognizing domestic resettlement as a long-term issue in public policy.²⁹ The Refugee Act was spurred largely by the continual reauthorization of assistance programs which became a major issue in the late 1970s. Problems were only compounded further by issues of disorganization, repeated allocation of responsibilities, and a confusing ladder of authority in refugee assistance. Under the Refugee Act, the mounting issues

²⁶ James A. Elgass, “Federal Funding of United States Refugee Resettlement before and after the Refugee Act of 1980,” *Michigan Yearbook of International Legal Studies* 3, no. 1 (1982), 183.

²⁷ Norman L. Zucker, “Refugee Resettlement in the United States,” 175.

²⁸ Edward M. Kennedy, “Refugee Act of 1980,” *The International Migration Review* 15, no. 1/2 (1981), 148.

²⁹ Norman L. Zucker, “Refugee Resettlement in the United States,” 177.

were remedied, most significant of the Act included: an amended definition of what a “refugee,” was, made domestic humanitarian aid a priority, and rose the number of admitted refugees to 50,000 a year for 1980-82 (the number of refugees coming after the aforementioned years were then determined by the President).³⁰ Additionally, the Act gave, “statutory recognition to the Office of the US Coordinator for Refugee Affairs,”³¹ essentially creating an office of which were given broad responsibilities for burgeoning refugee admissions into the US and creating resettlement programs. An Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) was also established under the Refugee Act which was to be handled within the Department of Health and Human Service (HHS). The ORR, with assistance under the HHS, were able to give grants and contracts to public and private nonprofit agencies who were then able to provide a wide array of resettlement services.

Many of the services that were provided included job training, English-language classes, employment counseling, physical and mental health care, and other appropriate social services.³² States were also eligible for full, 100 percent reimbursement for money and medical aid for the initial three years of refugee residence in the US; this included administrative costs of aid programs. However, the three-year limitation was not effective until April of 1981. By putting the effective limitation date to 1981, it created a transition period for refugees, the domestic population, and state governments to give a reasonable time frame for refugees to be integrated into their respective communities. The three-year limitation was also given to evade any sort of unlimited period of assistance as previously seen by programs such as the IRAP. In short, the

³⁰ Refugee Act of 1980, Public Law 96-212, 96th Cong., 2d sess. (April 1, 1980), 1.

³¹ Norman L. Zucker, “Refugee Resettlement in the United States,” 177.

³² *Ibid.*

Refugee Act of 1980 was enacted to provide reasonable, humane, and flexible assistance in the form of aid programs for refugees while putting into consideration foreign and domestic concerns.

The Hmong American Experience

The Hmong who did make it to the US had a difficult time adjusting. Hmong culture is often centered around a heavy patriarchal system and organized by respective clans. Family roles in Hmong culture have often been defined through this male-dominated system, this means that the Hmong male has, historically, held leadership roles for both home and community. Many Hmong, before their encounter with the US, practiced the religion of shamanism. Shamanism refers to the belief in the supernatural and that people have souls as well as all other living things. When they die, their souls go to the afterlife where they wait to be reincarnated, or reborn. Additionally, ancestor worship and ritual performances are centered around shamanism, the knowledge of family ancestry and the rituals must be in the arsenal of the males to honor the family's spirits and ancestors' spirits.³³ The eventual migration of the Hmong to the US also meant that more Hmong were being exposed to US culture and religion. This meant that the many cultural and religious practices of the Hmong were possibly being lost and challenged in the melting pot of assimilation that was the US.

Starting from 1975 and onwards, Hmong refugees slowly trickled into the United States until the 1990s in which we saw the largest wave of immigration to the US. Approximately 300,000 Hmong migrated to the US to escape persecution from Southeast Asia with many more

³³ Yer J. Thao, *The Mong Oral Tradition: Cultural Memory in the Absence of Written Language* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006) 28-29.

on the way.³⁴ The largest waves of Hmong refugees landed in California, Wisconsin and Minnesota. This movement did not come without repercussions on the social aspect of Hmong families, however. Many social effects on Hmong families were prevalent; they were in a new land they were not familiar with, most could not speak English or were still learning, and most feared that their younger generation would lose all of their old, traditional culture. Hmong communities also feared that assimilating themselves into US culture would eventually strip them of their own Hmong identity, being that they are thousands of miles from their homeland with no way of returning. Acculturation is an important term to use here. It is a process in which continual contact between two more distinct societies cause cultural change.³⁵ Sometimes, those two cultures merged to form a “new” culture. Another crucial term to help pinpoint Hmong societal struggles with identity in the United States is adaptation. Adaptation is an individual’s capacity to settle into their new surrounding environmental conditions. This means the person or group must make changes to adjust to the newly found conditions and environment in order to effectively function in the dominant society. Lastly, assimilation is the most crucial term. It is the process in which an individual or group is absorbed into the dominant culture, usually, gradually and in varied degrees of assimilation.

Fully assimilating will occur when a new member of society becomes indifferent to older, more experienced members of the dominant society. According to Milton Gordon, there are several stages to assimilation. First is cultural assimilation or acculturation. The new members of the dominant society must find a way to adjust to their new environment, this may mean stripping themselves of old religions. Second, structural assimilation or entrance into social

³⁴ Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of Hmong to the Midwestern United States* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), foreword.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

groups and institutions of the dominant culture or society. Assimilating your way into the dominant culture and other people means trying to enter into the fray of a culture or society you are trying to be a part of. Third, the marital assimilation or intermarriage with the majority group members of the dominant society, in this case Hmong marrying whites. Fourth, Identity that comes solely from the dominant society. So, instead of identifying with your Hmong identity you now identify as a United States citizen. Fifth, would be the absence of prejudice about the majority members of society. Sixth, the absence of discrimination against the dominant society members. And seventh, the absence of value and power conflict within the host society.³⁶

In an interview with a female Hmong in her teens, who was born in Thailand and spent much of her childhood in the US, talked about the difference she saw in Hmong culture compared to American culture:³⁷

“Yeah, Hmong and Americans are different. Like, in the American culture you can fall in love and then you can get married. But in the Hmong culture, your family, your parents, help you to find a good husband. Personally, I want to get married to someone I fall in love with, not someone my mom and dad pick out for me to marry. People should be able to fall in love before they get married. I don’t think my parents understand this. I don’t think they know this is what I want.”³⁷

Often, with assimilation comes a language barrier. Hmong rituals from shamanism and oral culture often come into conflict with US customs. Since the Hmong heavily rely on their language to pass down traditions from the elders to the younger generation, it can be a challenge if language becomes lost. With Milton Gordon’s study on assimilation, it is clear that sometimes language can be stripped in settling into the dominant society. As the teen above felt, as well as

³⁶ Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 70.

³⁷ Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of Hmong*, 141.

many other young Hmong teens, shared how they were misunderstood by their parents. This would inevitably lead to the younger generation's disinterest in learning about Hmong tradition and culture. Fear of the loss of culture but, more importantly, the loss of connection between parent and child became more immediate with the arrival of Hmong into the US. As an adult Hmong father said about the assimilation of his son, "My children...they are more American than me...In Laos, there is no question that a child listens to his father...I try my best to teach [my son] the Hmong ways, but I know he will go more to American ways."³⁸

Yet, not all Hmong elders were opposed to the assimilation into US culture. As an elder Hmong male of the age of seventy-six said (about the adjustment of the younger generation in the US):³⁹

"Our children and our grandchildren are speaking in English now. They know more about this country than we do. I am happy that my children know English and that they are Christians. These are good things and important things to living in the United States. They need to find jobs and work and pay bills. They need to live like American people do. I only wish they are respectful and work hard. I am more concerned with this than if my children can speak in Hmong or know about Hmong Things."³⁹

Although openness to this was not uncommon, many other Hmong elders had issues with their children and other family members becoming too much like Americans. As mentioned before, the Hmong passed their traditions down through oral tradition. Being that the Hmong do not have an official written language, this was the only way they were able to pass down their culture. Oral tradition passes down things such as culture through stories about old folktales, stresses the importance of language in a culture devoid of written customs, teaches about

³⁸ Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of Hmong*, 142.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

traditional values that are held in the community, and the points out significance of religion.⁴⁰

Without knowing the language, story-telling of stories, riddles, poems, shaman rituals, and many other cultural customs would be lost. Elder Phoua Her described her view of her grandchildren:⁴¹

“My grandchildren are becoming too American. They no longer understand [Hmong]. They said [Hmong] stories are too boring. They do not know what the story is about because they have lost the [Hmong] language. When I try to teach them about my traditional values and cultural values they walk away from me. When I ask them to go out to the garden in our backyard to get me lemon grass (*tauj qab*) to put on the food they do not know what *tauj qab* looks like and they bring me green onion, cilantro or other types of vegetables.”⁴¹

This resignation by the younger generation, the Hmong Elders say, creates a breakdown between intergenerational communication which then affects the relationship and trust within the Hmong family structure. Elders emphasize a longing of the old days when story time circles were able to teach Hmong children, who were previously able to understand the Hmong language, into learning about societal norms and culture. Being that bonding within the family came when stories were told, the fact that Hmong children did not comprehend the language broke the hearts of the Elders.

“Why Are They Here?”

Even though the coming decade of the 1980s was a very welcoming time, it was not without its faults, however. During the 1970s-80s, protests against refugee entrance ran amuck throughout much of the States during this period. To help calm the majority who disparaged refugees, incoming refugees were profiled in a particular manner to try and manipulate the

⁴⁰ Yer J. Thao, *The Mong Oral Tradition*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

numbers. Large influxes of refugees were then grouped into certain ethnicities to make the total group seem smaller and less prevalent. For example, the total of 100,000 arriving newcomers could be profiled into different categories of ethnicity (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, Mien, Thai, etc.) rather than the total number of Southeast Asians who were flooding into US neighborhoods that did not want them. Congressmen attempted to deceive the masses in order to appeal to the greater morality of giving asylum to people who desperately needed safety. Even though this deceit helped to lessen the animosity towards refugees it also had its positive and negative effects. On the positive, the profiling showed which groups were having an easier time, compared to others, in assimilating to society.

However, the Interagency Task Force interrogated many refugees asking for their education levels and seeing how they would contribute to society. While this sort of “rough” survey could profile an incoming group’s contribution they also hindered groups that greatly needed sponsorship from volunteering agencies. These volunteer agencies, who received grants by the government, wanted to determine if incoming refugees were fit and worthy for US society. To persuade these agencies, policy makers would often have to create a narrative that refugees were escaping communism.⁴² Often, Hmong people were unable to speak English or seldomly spoke it. This language barrier would often mark them as “unfit” for US society. The topic of refugees can often be filled with confusion for US citizens who are not familiar with the situations of incoming peoples. That is the case with the Hmong who, up until the Vietnam War, were never known to the United States government and its citizens.

Problematic also were President Ford’s various statements that linked refugees to the same status as immigrants in the summer 1975. While not directly relating the two on a legal

⁴² Victor Jew, “‘It Falls Into ‘Who Are They?’: The Cultural Interface of Southeast Asian Refugee Policy Making, 1975 to 1980,” *Asian American Policy Review* 25, (2014): 16, accessed, November 3, 2018.

basis, per se, his statements implied the two as candidates for similar public good, or as contributors to the “American Dream.” This did not bode well as immigrants were already unwanted in the eyes of the domestic population, molding the image of refugees into something like immigrants only increased animosity. Prior to Ford’s statements, the attitude of the domestic public on refugees were already bad, to say the least. A Gallup Poll in the spring of 1975 surveyed that 54 percent opposed the influx of refugees.⁴³ Southeast Asian refugees were entering the US at large numbers thanks to the Refugee Act; this no doubt stirred the public into opposing letting these new people into the country. Hoping to stop or, at the very least, slow the number of incoming refugees, many politicians tried to argue against the continuous waves of displaced people. Despite the unanimous passing of the Refugee Act of 1980, its enactment leading up to its eventual signing by President Carter was not devoid of opposition, however. Burt Talcott, a Republican congressman from California, was aware of the large population of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian refugees resettling in his state region. Reiterating the sentiment of the opposition, he had a statement in the 1970s in which he exclaimed, “Damn it, we have too many Orientals.”⁴⁴

This attitude changed with the presidency of Jimmy Carter. President Carter, who served as the 39th US President from 1977-81, heavily stressed humanitarian aid during his campaign for the presidency in 1976. After his presidential victory, he gave his inaugural address in January of 1977 in which he stated, “Because we are free, we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clear-cut preference for those societies which

⁴³ Victor Jew, “It Falls Into ‘Who Are They?’”, 14.

⁴⁴ Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 18.

share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights.”⁴⁵ This marked a huge change in the US’s approach to diplomacy. The era of the late 1970s-80s saw the US as a nation that welcomed immigrants, refugees and any people whose human rights were being abused by overseas nations. The Carter administration, dictated by a new sense of human rights responsibilities, opened up talks of refugee reform and policy. Ultimately, the Refugee Act came out of this short-lived period of openness.

Upon Carter’s exit from the presidency in 1981, he gave a Union Address on refugees, “We cannot hope to build a just and humane society at home if we ignore the humanitarian claims of refugees...Our country can be proud that hundreds of thousands of people around the world would risk everything they have—including their own lives—to come to our country.”⁴⁶ Painting the refugees as politically persecuted people brought sympathy from the US public to the incoming refugees. Unfortunately, this sympathy was drastically changed with the presidency of Ronald Reagan (1981-89). Reagan took a different approach, in one of his Union Addresses Reagan painted the picture of refugees very differently than Carter did, using language such as “impoverished” and “economic misfortune” to describe the refugees.⁴⁷ By doing this, sympathy was, instead, replaced with anger as the masses began to see the incoming peoples as a group trying to take advantage of the US’s sympathetic attitudes. Different also were the changing political parties in office. Reagan’s defeat of Carter during the 1980 elections changed many office seats, many of which were previously held by liberal politicians (who were carrying on Carter’s rhetoric of openness). Senator Edward Kennedy, who had a hand in passing the Refugee

⁴⁵ Office of the Historian, “Carter and Human Rights, 1977–1981.” Accessed December 16, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/human-rights>

⁴⁶ Jimmy Carter, *State of the Union Address*, 1981.

⁴⁷ Ronald Reagan, *State of the Union Address*, 1982.

Act, was replaced by Senator Alan K. Simpson who later stressed, “compassion fatigue,” and the limits of resettlement policy.⁴⁸ By 1982, significant changes in refugee admission and resettlement took place. Reductions in social programming were implemented. Social programs provided for incoming refugees such as job training, housing, and public welfare were either being cut or completely eliminated.

Prejudice and Hardship

By the 1980s, the Census recorded 5,204 Hmong had already resettled in the US. By 1990, that number rose to more than 90,000.⁴⁹ Kao Kalia Yang, an author and activist, remembers settling into the Minnesota-Twin Cities area and receiving a harsh welcoming from Minnesota residents. “On the streets,” she said, “sometimes people yelled for us to go home. Next to waves of hello, we received the middle finger.”⁵⁰ Lee Fang told his life story of him and his family’s origins in Laos to their eventual journey to the US. Once resettled in the US, Fang

⁴⁸ Norman L. Zucker, “Refugee Resettlement in the United States,” 181.

⁴⁹ Kao Kalia Yang, *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* (New York: Coffee House Press, 2010), 133.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

had to face the realization that he and his family were not fully accepted into the new society they were living in:⁵¹

“In the fall of 1980, I was enrolled in an elementary school. Being a newcomer in a strange environment and seeing very unusual-looking people was exciting. Some of the other students were really nice to me, but others were not so friendly. I remember one day, when I was walking home from school with my two brothers, my sister, and my cousin, we encountered a group of Euro-Americans who were playing baseball in the middle of the street. They yelled and made faces at us as though we had done something wrong. It was the first time something like that had happened to me...I experienced for the first time what it was like to be discriminated against and hated simply because we looked different...It was the first time since we arrived that I longed for Laos and its beautiful countryside where prejudice did not exist.”⁵¹

Racial discrimination was only one of the many problems refugees like the Hmong had to face. On top of that was financial hardship. Welfare for refugees, implemented by the US government, were barely enough to cover Hmong refugee families especially after programs were being cut. Kao Kalia remembers how her family of four received a monthly check of \$650 dollars in the mail. The small apartment they lived in cost \$250 and, after paying off the rest of the bills such as electricity and car insurance, her and her family were only left with \$150 to spend on food and other essentials. Though American sponsor families were readily available, and willing to help refugee families, many were not fortunate enough to be provided a sponsor. This meant that some families were solely on their own in finding jobs, learning the language and providing for themselves. After programs were being cut, and even eliminated in the 1980s, many had an even harder time learning English because those particular programs were no longer available. This made finding jobs an even more arduous task. Not knowing the language of the dominant society

⁵¹ Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 157.

made many Hmong feel trapped. They could not ask for what they wanted, and they were even discriminated for not being able to speak the language of the land.⁵²

The cost of escaping persecution in Laos and making it to the US cost many of the older Hmong their lives that they may never regain. The fact that Fang's parents long for a return to their homeland of Laos US reflects that. Not being able to partake in past activities in Laos (like hunting and fishing) and not being able to talk to long-lost friends about each other's family lives creates a mental breakdown and resignation from their respective families.⁵³

Conclusion

The Refugee Act of 1980 did wonders to help many refugee groups like the Hmong migrate to the US to escape persecution and start a new life. Despite a new restart on life though, Hmong people's lives have been wrought with problems of assimilation, acculturation and overall tragedy. Being a people who have lived almost their entire lives as a minority group in their places of settlement in China, Laos and the United States, they have always fought to preserve their identity from the dominant culture. Their lives in China made them targets since they were considered "savage" people. Their eventual migration to Laos where their participation in the Vietnam War, particularly the Secret War in Laos, alongside the US made them criminals for rebelling. Finally, to their eventual lives on US soil which became filled with issues of cultural destruction, racism by the general public and marred by changes in refugee attitudes and policy. The Hmong are no strangers to persevering. The Refugee Act was filled

⁵² Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 158.

⁵³ Ibid.

with issues of organization, funding and political, as well as domestic, opposition. Yet, it still was able to let in the Hmong into the country who only wanted one thing: to live their lives. In an interview with the Hmong Elder Jou Yee Xiong, one of the first Hmong individuals (including his family) to settle in the United States, he said it best in a recording to his son-in-law (who was residing in a Thai refugee camp at the time), “If I am able to survive, so can you.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, 76.

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