

**Hmong Acculturation in West-Central Wisconsin**

**A Comparison of Oral Histories**

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## Abstract

When the United States pulled out of Southeast Asia following the Vietnam War, they left behind an ethnic group that would soon be targeted for extermination. The Hmong of Laos assisted the United States during the war, and as such, became the targets of the victorious forces. Forced to flee their homeland for fear of annihilation, the Hmong traveled to Thailand, living in refugee camps. The United States granted many of them asylum, and the Hmong soon found themselves in a completely foreign land, full of new challenges, technologies, and ethnicities. Many of them migrated again to the midwest, primarily in the Minnesota and Wisconsin regions. Minneapolis houses the largest population, but many of them also settled in the Eau Claire and Menomonie regions. Using oral interviews from both area, this paper will identify how these different locations affected the ability of Hmong migrants to acculturate, gain education and employment, and maintain their cultural identity. This project provides insights that are important to understand in order to better help refugee groups in the future.

## Section 1-Introduction

The story of the Hmong people is one of migration. From the borders of China, to the mountain jungles of Laos, these people have a history of being able to adapt to whatever landscape that they are in. When the Vietnam War ended however, the Hmong found themselves for the first time being forced to leave their homes for lands unknown, or face genocidal slaughter by the Communist Viet-Cong and Pathet Lao forces. The Hmong assisting the United States to rescue downed fighter pilots, and wage guerilla warfare against the Communist forces sealed their fate when the United States withdrew. Fleeing to Thailand, and in many instances, being granted refugee status in the United States were the next steps in their journey. Though once in the United States, a whole new set of challenges would await them, very different than those they had previously encountered.

Originally landing in coastal states such as California, large numbers of Hmong would follow family, friends, and employment opportunities to various parts of the country. The Upper Midwest became the final destination for the largest majority of them, particularly the Minneapolis/ St. Paul region, and West Central Wisconsin. The time period and location chosen by the Hmong to settle in, did however have an impact on the availability of resources, educational opportunities, and played a part in how they maintained their cultural identity while acculturating into mainstream American culture. The resources of the Twin Cities, the demographics, and the environment, are greatly different than those of the Eau Claire/ Menomonie region. The oral histories collected throughout this research project, when contrasted

with those of the Twin Cities, will show what differences, were present through the acculturation process.

The acculturation of Hmong in areas such as Georgia, California, and other locations, will also give insight as to if there are common patterns shown in large cities versus more rural areas, the differences in gender expectations, generational differences, and age of the individuals when they arrived in this country. By understanding these patterns, it is easier to paint a picture of what the acculturation process for a refugee from Southeast Asia is like, the difficulties presented by the language barrier, and the failings of our own assistance programs designed to help these people. Only in understanding these difficulties and differences, will we be better able to help individuals in need in the future.

It is hoped that through the modest research done for this project, on a local level, there will be more insight into the Hmong community here in the Eau Claire area. With the community of Hmong here continuing to grow, branching out into all areas and occupational fields, knowledge is the key in working together with other members of the community, so that the area can prosper as a whole, instead of being divided over petty differences and ignorance of each other.

## Section 2 - Methodology

### Selection of the Interview Questions

To perform a proper comparison between the participants in my study and those from the Minneapolis studies, it was necessary to narrow the focus of the questions specifically to those that could be compared accurately. For this, individuals from the Minnesota studies were carefully selected based on gender, age of migrating, period of arrival into the United States, and

experiences had once arriving into the country. The interviews were then evaluated, and specific questions that they were asked were selected that could also be applicable to the participants chosen from the Eau Claire region. These questions were then written in the interviewer's own manner of speaking, to give a more personalized feel to the interview questions. The entirety of these questions can be found in Appendix A.

During the actual interview process, the questions in some instances were spoken directly as written, but in many instances, the wording of the questions were altered in order to better accommodate the linguistic capabilities of the person being interviewed. This varied greatly from person to person, as some were very fluent in English, whereas some had a very limited English vocabulary. In some instances, questions were not asked at all, either by already getting their answer during a previous question, or discovering that the question would not be applicable to that person earlier in the interview process.

### Selection of Interviewees

To get a more accurate portrayal of the diversity of Hmong in the Eau Claire Region, the individuals selected were chosen to try to be an example of different spectrums. One of the interviewees was selected due to their young age when coming to this country with her family. The challenges for the Hmong youth were different from those of the elders, as they had fewer occupational responsibilities, but they were more immersed in American culture by having to go to school. This gave advantages, but also posed challenges.

One of the individuals interviewed was a middle-aged male. Because Hmong society is patriarchal, the responsibilities of the male were very high within the family as a bread winner and leader of the family. They were also looked on less for child rearing, instead being expected

to go into the work-force as early as possible, immersing them into American society on distinct levels than others.

Another individual was a middle-aged female. She was chosen to contrast the experiences of the male, and to gain insight into her unique perspective of the acculturation process. As a female, she was primarily tasked with maintaining the household, and taking care of the children. Though, due to the different economy in the United States compared to Laos, she would also have to enter the workforce as well.

The last participants that were chosen were a husband and wife, both of retirement age. These participants were married before they left Laos, so it gives unique insight as to the problems faced as a married couple acculturating to the United States. It was also interesting to see the change in, and still adherence to, the patriarchal Hmong household. There were instances where the female answered the questions entirely, but in the majority of the questions, the male answered the questions, and the female would add her input afterwards. This could be simply how this particular family is, or it could be a lingering presence of the prior Hmong culture in Laos.

Three of the five interviewees did not have an extensive English vocabulary, so it was decided that they would best be able to convey their message in their native language. For this reason, those three had translators present throughout the interview who were fluent in both English and Hmong. The translators selected were the interviewees own children, all of whom were in their early twenties or older, and had college degrees. The degrees were not a criterion for translating, but they were an added benefit. With the children as translators, it was felt that the interviewees could be more candid in the manner in which they spoke, and the translators had no hesitation in asking for clarification from either myself, or the interviewee.

### Section 3 - Historiography

Many of the earliest scholarly works regarding the Hmong Diaspora were written when the evacuation from Laos was still in its earliest stages. The French were the primary contributors to this scholarship, having had a colonizing presence in Laos since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, early historians such as Gary Yia Lee, drew from these original French documents, providing a foundation for later scholarly works to be produced. One of his earliest works that will be utilized is “Refugees from Laos: Historical Background and Causes,” which was originally based on research conducted in 1971 and 1972. The article was then supplemented with field research in Thai refugee camps in 1985, and continued being revised in 1992, and updated in 2008. Most of the works cited in this article are from the 1970s, with minuet additions being added as the plight of the Hmong continues. In this article one of the primary arguments that is made is that the reasoning for Hmong evacuation from Laos has changed since the beginning of the diaspora, and that the Laotian government continues to add new regime policies aimed at oppressing the Hmong. Lee also argues that although the Hmong Diaspora is considered by many to be concluded, “Hmong asylum seekers continued to come to Huei Nam Khao (White Water) in Phetchaboon, Thailand. By 2008, more than 7,600 of them are given temporary shelter there, although many are seen as economic rather than political refugees.”<sup>1</sup> This information is of use to my research in providing historical information as to the original causes of the Diaspora, as well as current information regarding the continued conflict that Hmong refugees are enduring.

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Yia Lee, “Refugees from Laos: Historical Background and Causes,” (2008).  
<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~yeulee/History/refugees%20from%20laos.html>.



The lack of refugee status allowing for easy migration to the United States is also a repeated concern for participants in my study, who still have family in Laos or Thailand.

A second article from the works of Gary Yia Lee titled “Nostalgia and Cultural Re-creation: The Case of the Hmong Diaspora” makes the primary conclusion “that Hmong culture is undergoing tremendous change, partly as a result of cultural commodification and adopted elements from other cultures, but mostly as a response to the Hmong’s longing for a homeland and a past that now exists mostly in their social memories.”<sup>2</sup> Lee argues that many Hmong attempt to reproduce aspects of their culture in their new host country, but the rationale behind this reproduction is largely determined by the age of the individual.

Those that are more elderly are acting out of an attempt to recreate their previous environments due to a sense nostalgia, whereas those that are from younger generations either try to adapt aspects of traditional Hmong culture to their new surroundings, or that they disregard the previous culture entirely. He also notes that many of the traditional artistic pursuit of creating clothing, embroidered artwork, and music, is largely done for profit, as opposed to a desire to maintain their cultural identity. Lee makes several controversial comments throughout this article, such as “Hmong women in Laos and Thailand continue to make embroideries, although this handicraft is now lost to the Hmong in the diaspora.”<sup>3</sup> In making encompassing statements such as this, it causes assumptions to be made as to the present state of the Hmong culture, and is not representative of all Hmong people, an issue that could be confusing to the reader.

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Yia Lee, “Nostalgia and Cultural Re-creation: The Case of the Hmong Diaspora,” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (2008): 151.

<sup>3</sup> Lee, “Nostalgia and Cultural Re-creation,” 142.

This article is important to this project as it gives many points to evaluate, and determine if my own findings are similar, or opposing to his, particularly along the lines of maintaining cultural identity and traditional practices.

When trying to gain perspective as to what common problems have arisen within the Hmong community acculturating to their new environment, Kou Yang, Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at California State University, has done extensive work studying the after-effects and difficulties of this transition. In one of their earlier articles “Hmong Men’s Adaptation to Life in the United States” Yang argues that adaptation to the United States for Hmong adult men has progressed differently than other Hmong age and gender groups. This difference in adaptation partly originates in the change from the traditional patriarchal Hmong family in Laos and Thailand, to the relative equality between gender roles that is present in the United States. Yang notes that “From childhood to old age, Hmong men assume many superior roles, and are perceived by family and society to be the breadwinners, protectors, leaders, and pillars of the family.”<sup>4</sup> Yang’s analysis also determines that depending on what the occupation or lifestyle of the individual was prior to coming to the United States, this dictated what their typical educational and employment pursuits were, as well as what obstacles were typically encountered. Considering that many of the first refugees were politically or militarily affiliated, and that the later refugees came from a more diverse array of backgrounds, this can help to identify a possible pattern in the ability to adapt to the new surroundings, dependent on the time period of departing Laos.

In the article “Hmong Americans: A review of felt needs, problems, and community development,” also by Kou Yang, his work takes a broader look at the difficulties that Hmong

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<sup>4</sup> Kou Yang, "Hmong Mens'Adaptation to Life in the United States." *Hmong Studies Journal Vol. 1 No. 2, (1997): 2*

have had adapting to life in the United States, and identifies specific areas such as location, language, generation gaps, youth gang activity, health care, and discrimination as being ongoing difficulties that Hmong feel are hindering their progress. Particularly noteworthy is the argument that in the early days of Hmong settlement, the location that they resided in played a significant part in their ability to progress quickly. One example is in the discussion of the Fresno Hmong community in the 1980s, having been one of the largest in the country. Yang indicates that “Very few Hmong qualify to apply for the high skilled jobs, and they are forced to compete with other minority groups for the low skilled and seasonal jobs. Many Hmong in the Central Valley of California have turned to farming, but their slash-and-burn agriculture skills have not been compatible with agribusiness in Fresno.”<sup>5</sup> He does go on to note that the Hmong have become integrated into a wider variety of professions over the last two decades, but this information is in part responsible as to why the Hmong performed other migrations after the initial one, settling in large numbers in the Mid-West. Also, these other issues that the Hmong have indicated as an impediment to their success, could be a contributing factor as to why the Hmong have chosen smaller areas, such as Eau Claire, instead of larger metropolitan areas.

Jeremy Hein, Sociology professor at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire has several published works regarding Indochinese refugees, which include the Hmong, Vietnamese, and Cambodians. In the book *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States*, he argues that the Hmong are a unique refugee group due to rural living conditions in the Highlands of Laos prior to evacuation. As a result, the Hmong have had the most difficult time acculturating and prospering in United States society out of all other Indochinese refugee

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<sup>5</sup> Kou Yang, "Hmong Americans: A Review of Felt Needs, Problems, and Community Development." *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 4, (2003): 9.

groups. This pertains to my research in that when conducting interviews with Hmong individuals, the measurement of success can't be contrasted against other ethnic immigrant groups and the standard American view of success. Instead the view of success must become more of an individual basis viewpoint, as to what their own views towards whether their acculturation was successful. This is vitally important, because often the view of success acculturating, when analyzing an immigrant group is placed against traditional standards of education level, political involvement, average income, and professional positions. Instead, success can be measured in if the individual thinks that their life is better now than it was in their home country, and if they are happy with their family's current status.

Hein also draws the conclusion that

“The fact that the United States contributed to the conditions that led to their flight gives Indochinese refugees a historical distinctiveness that will remain long after their initial cultural differences have been modified by the birth of new generations in the United States. Indochinese refugees also reject the assimilation model's simplified choice between preserving homeland traditions or accepting those in the United States. Rather than transplanting traditions, they re-create communal institutions that are an amalgamation of both cultures.”<sup>1</sup>

This lends further justification for not adhering to traditional standards of acculturation success, for the Hmong experience will be different from other refugee groups. Acculturation and integration into American society can be viewed by an individual location basis, for the Hmong in California or Georgia are in different environments, so their blending of cultural practices will look different than those in the midwest. This will make Hmong culture appear different in some respects throughout the country.

It is important to identify other projects that have been conducted that are similar to my own, so as to learn what their findings have been that may be different, and also to try and identify areas of research that have not been overly examined. *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora* by Chia Youyee Vang documents a series of oral history interviews performed by in St. Paul/Minneapolis, and compared them with other communities across the country. The primary focus of Vang's research was the ability of the Hmong in this location to prosper due to educational advancements, organizing Hmong community outreach programs, re-creation of social and religious structures, and becoming integrated in various levels of public office. Vang devotes a large part of the book to the creation of organizations such as the Association of Hmong In Minnesota, and other Mutual Assistance Associations. The creation of these organizations is viewed as an integral part of the ability of the Hmong to acculturate and advance in American society. Furthermore, it is argued that events such as the Hmong New Year are key in helping the Hmong to maintain their cultural identity. These observations are based on the results from her oral history interviews, and are in opposition to some of the responses acquired in my own research, meaning they may be more applicable to areas that have high populations and significant ethnic diversity. In less populated areas, such as West-Central Wisconsin, the Hmong that participated in the oral history interviews that I conducted primarily received assistance from government agencies, and local church organizations. The Hmong New Year was also viewed not-so-much as a way to maintain their cultural identity, but as a way to connect with other Hmong in the area. Maintaining their language was the foremost way that the participants viewed as maintaining their cultural identity, followed by participation within their church.

*Hmong America*'s content does coincide with research collected for this project in regards to the reason that many Hmong migrated to the midwest in the first place. Vang notes that "Despite its cold winters, the Twin Cities became [his] preferred location due to the large population of Hmong, and the support that the host society gave to refugees."<sup>6</sup> Vang also indicates that proximity to family members was crucial for the Hmong, and that "lure of employment and business opportunities and the desire to avoid large urban concentrations"<sup>7</sup> were also key factors. This last point, of the desire to avoid urban concentrations, was identified repeatedly as one of the reasons that many Hmong that I interviewed stayed in West-Central Wisconsin, as opposed to areas such as the Twin Cities that may have had more assistance programs.

*Hmong Migration to the Midwestern United States* by Cathleen Jo Faruque is similar to *Hmong America* in that it is an analysis of oral histories performed within the population of Rochester, Minnesota. Faruque's analysis focuses on the themes of Cultural Awareness, ethnic loyalty, migration experience, and religion. Faruque makes the argument that the levels of acceptance of the new environment that the Hmong are placed in varies primarily along age lines. Faruque notes "The older adult Hmong overwhelmingly reported during the interview process a desire to return to live in Laos. Not the Laos as it currently exists, but the country of Laos as remembered in their past. The older adult Hmong's desire was to return to the lives that the Hmong were used to living while residing in that country."<sup>8</sup>

In contrast to my own findings, none of the responses from the participants indicated a desire to return to Laos, and perhaps the differences could be attributed to factors such as

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<sup>6</sup> Chia Youyee Vang, *Hmong America: Reconstructing Community in Diaspora*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010): 51.

<sup>7</sup> Vang, *Hmong America*, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong to the Midwestern United States* (New York: University Press of America, 2002): 170.

location, time period of coming to the United States, length of time spent in a refugee camp, or access to natural areas. Many of the Hmong that came to the United States in the first wave of refugees, during the mid to late 70s, had to evacuate Laos quickly. They were often part of the military that had opposed the Communist forces, and as such, were the first to be targeted. This quick evacuation could play a role in their views towards their home country, as opposed to those Hmong that resided in refugee camps for extended period so of time.

Faruque also makes mention of the conversion to Christianity that was prevalent among those she interviewed, stating “A number of the Hmong families interviewed for this study had difficulty expressing their reasons for converting to the Christian faith. This researcher believes most of the Hmong participants had experienced some type of informal pressure or a sense of obligation to convert, because of the assistance their families received from the local churches.”<sup>9</sup> This observation by Faruque could also be partly related to the reasons indicated in the previous paragraph. Those participating in the interviews for my study indicated they were often Christian before coming to the United States, converting in the refugee camp of their own accord.

The subject of religious conversion to Christianity is also heavily discussed in the article “Home is where you make it: Hmong Refugees in Georgia” by D.A. Duchon in which it is argued “A benefit that churches offer is that of a social outlet. The Hmong are used to living a life surrounded by neighbors and kin, with little privacy.” While later continuing “Churchgoers in the sample were happier, more prosperous, and more socially active than the non-churchgoers.”<sup>10</sup> This information is pertinent to my own research as all the participants were Christian,

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<sup>9</sup> Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong*, 161.

<sup>10</sup> D.A. Duchon, “Home Is Where You Make It: Hmong Refugees in Georgia.” *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (1997): 84.

and many of them identified their involvement in the church as being one of the primary components in their lives.

From these sources, it is apparent that there have been studies that are similar to mine, performed in different locations throughout the country, but primarily these focused on large metropolitan areas such as Rochester, MN, the Twin Cities, MN, or Fresno, CA. These studies identified the capabilities of Hmong to elevate into political offices, attain the highest levels of education, and create organizations dedicated to the Hmong advancement. The decisions made by the Hmong to settle in a particular area had a wide range of factors, and their definition of successful acculturation is equally as diverse. As has been noted, the Hmong people have recreated their culture in vastly different ways throughout the country, each individual population drawing from the resources and ethnic diversity that is present in that location.



## Section 4 - Comparative

### Education

Education is one of the key components in this country towards having a more financially secure future. Many of us that were born in the United States have been going to school since we were 5 years old, or before. After completing 12-13 years of primary education, many individuals seek higher education in either a college setting, a trade school, technical school, apprenticeship, or on the job training. In Laos, the Hmong levels of education varied greatly, depending on if you were in the military or not, or if you were part of the privileged minority that lived in a village where education was made available through U.S. aid. Those in the military received more education as part of their training than their farming counterparts did. Since the military personnel were some of the first targeted by the victorious Communist forces, many were often among the first to flee to the United States. As a result, the first wave of Hmong refugees was generally in possession of a higher set of skills and education than those that migrated to the United States later. The later groups of Hmong that migrated often did so because of economic hardships imposed on them by the new Laotian ruling regime, or the continued onslaught against them by the Vietnamese, who had targeted all Hmong for annihilation.

These later refugees often had little education in the Thai refugee camps. Any education received was often pertaining to the language and culture of their upcoming destination. When they arrived in the United States, and particularly the Midwest, each age group of Hmong refugees faced their own challenges. For the older Hmong in West-Central Wisconsin, the education was primarily focused on getting them a job, often in manual labor, as opposed to offering an education that would help them adapt and thrive in their new country. According to 1991 United States census data, 63 percent of Indochinese refugees were employed in “Blue

Collar” jobs, whereas only 17 percent were employed in “White Collar” jobs. This subject is touched on in the Savina Yang interview where she states:

Since there were four of the children that were still young when we came over to the States, I was the main person that took care of the kids. My husband was able to go to school for about a year, but after that year, through Human Services and the Job Center, they pretty much told everyone to go out and find a job. They stopped the education. My husband has been working ever since then.<sup>11</sup>

According to the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association “most elderly Hmong illiterates are not succeeding in ‘Regular English as A Second Language’ classes. They are not ready for employment in competitive jobs. They would be an excellent group to provide Hmong literacy, agricultural, and cottage industry training.”<sup>11</sup> This notion of being behind in education is also discussed in the 1986 *Leader Telegram* article “American Dream barred by language, Hmong say” where it states “My people are very far behind, and most don’t know the educational system. I try to give this message to the people. We’re very interested about our future. If we don’t have higher education, we will remain in poverty.”<sup>12</sup> In the 1990 United States census, 65 percent of Hmong Americans were unemployed, and 60 percent would be classified as living in poverty.<sup>13</sup> This would seem to indicate that 15 years after the Hmong began arriving in this country, they were still having difficulty acquiring the necessary education that would enable them to find suitable employment to effectively support their families. Nhia Lor Vang from Minneapolis indicated in their interview “The only reason that it is hard to live in the United States is the lack of education. Other than that, this is a good place to live.”<sup>14</sup> This difficulty in

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<sup>11</sup> Jack O’Connell Hmong Collection, *Hmong Mutual Assistance Association 1982-1990*, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire Special Collections and Archives, Box/Folder 1/5.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Johnson, “American Dream Barred by Language Hmong Say.” *Leader Telegram*, November 2, 1986: 3A.

<sup>13</sup> Kou Yang, “Hmong Diaspora of the Post-War Period,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal Vol. 12, No. 3* (2003): 287.

<sup>14</sup> Nhia Lor Vang, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

acquiring education, and thus employment has been particularly felt by Hmong men. This in some instances has caused its own problems, as the Hmong men often feel a sense of worthlessness due to their inability to provide for their family in the manner that they feel they should.

Others that were interviewed felt differently about the new equality experienced since living in the United States, viewing it as a benefit, as opposed to a blow to their masculinity, and role as head of the household. Wa Chao Yang and Kia Yang indicated in their interviews:

Wa Chao: Compared to living in Laos and Thailand, the roles over there are different. The dad had the ability to go to school and get an education, whereas the wife has to stay at home and do all of the housework and chores. So back then they didn't get the opportunity to go to school, whereas here, we both have equal roles. We both go to work, we both have the opportunity to go to school, so it is more of an equal opportunity.

Kia: Living in Laos and Thailand, guys stay at home and women do more of the housework. We worked more than the men. Living here it is equal opportunity, we are both viewed as the same. No one is going to work harder than the other. <sup>1</sup>

The younger generation of Hmong refugees had a different educational experience than the elders did. Being under the age 18, most Hmong children were forced to go to school by state law, meaning that they were forced to assimilate into American society faster than their parents. The experiences of the youths being placed in a completely new environment as a non-English speaking minority received different reactions, partially dependent on the age of the juvenile, and partly dependent on the location and demographics of the school. Fong Her from Minneapolis describes the early days of having to go to an American school, and the inability to communicate effectively with the teachers and students. He recalls:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Fong Her, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

When we got to school, of course we do not know any English so at that time I knew the words, “OK” and “yes.” I remember one time I was going to the teacher and just wanted to go to the bathroom. I went to the teacher and stared at him for a long time and I just ran out to the bathroom and I guess he understood that.<sup>1</sup>

The time period that Hmong youth went to school had a significant part to play in many instances, as to how well they progressed in school. Though one must remember, that even with programs in place, it takes a while to become proficient in any language, particularly English. The first arrivals, through the early 1980s had a very difficult time because there was not much knowledge about Hmong language or culture. According to Chia Youyee Vang “A Hmong community did not exist in the United States prior to the arrival of refugees.”<sup>16</sup> Later refugees that would come to the United States during the mid to late 1980s, and the 1990s, such as Mai Lor, who arrived in the United States when she was 9 years old in 1986, found that the foundation had been laid for providing adequate English language assistance to the refugees. In her interview she stated “They were very helpful. When I was in my first 3 years in school, I would go to the normal class, and then half of that day I would spend with my ESL teacher.”<sup>17</sup> Lee Vu of Minneapolis, who arrived in 1989 well after a language program for Hmong students had been established, still found the school experience to be difficult. When asked about what the hardest thing about going to school was, he responded “Well it was very hard for me, because I’m shy and couldn’t speak English. I don’t know where the bathroom is.”<sup>18</sup>

The differences between Mai, Lee, and Fong’s experiences could be attributed to a number of things. Time period could be one of the factors as mentioned previously, but also the size of the school and its student population could also be factors. Mai went to school in Eau

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<sup>16</sup> Vang, *Hmong America*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Mai Lor, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 21st, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Vu, interview by Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis, 1991.

Claire, where the schools are smaller, and the primary ethnic minority at the time were the Hmong. This allowed for more individualized attention to be paid in developing the language skills needed to progress in school. Fong and Lee on the other hand, went to school in the Twin Cities. These schools are generally more populated, and have a wider array of ethnicities present. The amount of individualized attention that Hmong students would receive would not be as significant as they would be in Mai's situation.

While on the subject of language acquisition, this subject in particular has been one of the biggest obstacles for Hmong refugees to overcome, as it is with any non-English speaking immigrant. English is a difficult language to learn, especially since the Hmong didn't have written language for most of their history until 1953 when "religious figures like Father F.M. Savina, Dr. William Smalley, Father Yves Bertrais, and Dr. Linwood Barney carefully observed Hmong culture, speculated on Hmong history and ethnographic origins, and helped create a Hmong writing system based on Roman letters."<sup>19</sup> According to a 1986 newspaper article in the *Leader Telegram* Yee Xiong, Director of the Hmong Association of Eau Claire, indicated "Language is the No. 1 obstacle of getting in the factory door. When we came to this country, we had to learn a new language, which is a very, very difficult language."<sup>20</sup>

Difficulties acquiring employment, assimilating into mainstream American culture, or excelling in primary or secondary schools due to the language barrier has been one of the most common problems voiced by individuals that were interviewed from both locations. Savina Yang indicated "Still to this day, one of the saddest things is that we still rely on our kids for translation. We kind of wanted to be more independent, but the language barrier is hindering

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Hilmer, *A People's History of the Hmong*. (Minneapolis: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010): 27

<sup>20</sup> Gary Johnson, "American Dream Barred by Language Hmong Say." *Leader Telegram*, November 2, 1986: 3A.

us.”<sup>21</sup> Wa Chao Yang also indicated that the hardest part of adapting to the United States culture was “Not knowing the language, and not knowing how to drive were the two hardest things,”<sup>22</sup> as did Mai Lor in her statement “I think it is also the language barrier that was hard for my family, and for myself.”<sup>23</sup>

From the Minneapolis/St Paul interviews, much of what was experienced by the Eau Claire Hmong was also experienced in their location, indicating that no matter where you reside, when you are a foreign immigrant trying to adapt to the culture of the host country, learning the language efficiently can be one of the biggest obstacles in acculturating. In her interview, Xai Thao, who arrived in 1985 indicated “The hardest would have to be that the older generation like us who have no educational background and are not familiar with the language. It is very hard. If we could read and write and know the language, then everything would have been better.”<sup>24</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by Yaw Yang in her interview. Particularly because she was older when she came to the United States, she had a more difficult time learning the language than those who were younger and went to primary and secondary schools to acquire their language skills. In her interview she states “When I came to America, I didn’t work or go to school because I didn’t know the language. I let my daughters-in-law and sons go to school. I watched their children, so they could have an American life like everyone else.”<sup>25</sup>

### Cultural Identity

The United States is viewed as a melting pot of multiple different ethnicities and cultures. When a foreign ethnicity migrates to this country, they must decide if and how to maintain their

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<sup>21</sup> Savina Yang, interview by author, Menomonie, December 31st, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Wa Chao Yang, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 6th, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Mai Lor, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 21st, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Xai Thao, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Yaw Yang, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

own cultural identity, while simultaneously assimilating into American culture. The Hmong are no exception, though they have a wide array of methods for maintaining their cultural identity. Much of this is dependent on age of the individuals, what their social status was in Laos or Thailand, when they came to the United States, and the communities that they ended up finally settling in.

In Laos, one of the most celebrated holidays for the Hmong was the New Year festivals that were held. It was a way to celebrate the year's harvest, connect with relatives and friends, and display the good fortune or social status of your family, usually by how big of a feast you were able to hold. In the United States, the New Year celebrations are still held every year, and in areas that have large Hmong populations such as the Twin Cities, the event is massive, drawing in Hmong people from all over the region, and even the surrounding states. Though in these events, the celebration has taken on a different meaning for those that attend than it did in Laos. It is often viewed as a way to display and pass on the traditions and culture of your people to future generations. Again, the reasoning behind hosting and attending the New Year celebrations are very diverse.

Many of the interviews that have been examined for this paper from Minnesota and elsewhere, are different from the reasons given by the West-Central Wisconsin Hmong interviewees. According to research that was performed in Rochester, Minnesota by Cathleen Jo Faruque, "The Hmong families that participated in this research believed the New year event was the most meaningful way to provide their children an opportunity to experience the Hmong culture first hand."<sup>26</sup> Her book includes a statement from the individual interviewed, where they express "The Hmong New Year shows us that we are who we are and that we should be proud of

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<sup>26</sup> Cathleen Jo Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong to the Midwestern United States* (New York: University Press of America, 2002): 125.

being Hmong. We also show the young people that they are Hmong people too, not just American people. That is the only most important thing we can do to keep our culture alive.”<sup>27</sup>

Other viewpoints of the Hmong New Year don’t necessarily see it as a manner of preserving cultural heritage. Christianity among Hmong in this country can take the place of the community interconnectedness that the New Year used to provide. Jovy Her explained in his interview:<sup>28</sup>

Back in our country, every New Year we can’t wait until the New Year festival. When you are young, you have so much fun seeing the New Year festival. In this country, in the U.S., I don’t go to the New Year festival a whole lot. I spend most of my time going to church, and being involved in the church.

Jovy later explains what he views as being the most important part of the Hmong culture that he wants to pass on to his children. He indicated:<sup>29</sup>

Actually, I want my kids to know my language. I don’t want them to forget my language. I want them to know how to speak my language, and actually my culture...I am a Christian so Christianity here and in Thailand are the same thing. There is not much different about culture, but language is what I want my kids to hold on to.

The time period that Hmong refugees came over to the United States is seen as a direct cause for differing viewpoints of what the New Year’s celebration meant to those attending. In the earliest days of diaspora, many Hmong were coming to this country with very little family support, and no true Hmong communities established, even in the more populous settlement

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<sup>27</sup> Faruque, *Migration of the Hmong*, 127.

<sup>28</sup> Jovy Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 13th, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Jovy Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 13th, 2017.



locations such as California and Minnesota. For these earliest Hmong, such as Dang Her, who arrived in 1975 to the Minnesota region, he explains:<sup>30</sup>

The Hmong New Year is not the only way the Hmong have tried to maintain their cultural identity, while simultaneously attempting to acculturate into mainstream American

We missed our families and friends so much that when we learned about other Hmong families in Minnesota, we immediately tried to contact them. The New Year celebration was quite different from what you see today. Each family contributed some food. It was a potluck. We were all just happy to be with other Hmong families.

society. Each person has a different view of what makes up their cultural identity, be-it their clothing, music, arts and crafts, or traditional celebrations and practices. One subject in particular is quite polarized, with each end of the spectrum being fully immersed into the cultural identity and practices that accompany it. That subject is religion. Traditional Hmong religion is animist. This belief system involves ancestor worship, and that evil spirits are to blame for many of life's woes and illnesses. As a result, elaborate practices have been developed through the ages by the Shaman's (animist spiritual leader) to combat these evil spirits. Rituals accompany most significant events in someone's life to appease the spirits, including childbirth, funerals, weddings, and so on. This comes in to stark contrast to the other end of the religious spectrum that many Hmong have adopted - Christianity.

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<sup>30</sup> Vang, *Hmong America*, 101.

Christianity in the form of Catholicism was first introduced into the Hmong population by French Missionaries when the French colonized South-East Asia. As was mentioned before, the creation of the Hmong written language was a direct result of the work of Missionaries attempting to convert the Hmong to Christianity. Many Hmong adopted Christianity in Laos, while many more adopted it in the refugee camps in Thailand. When the Hmong arrived in the United States, many who had already adopted Christianity gravitated towards others who had, while others adopted the religion to assimilate into American culture. This religious community in many aspects has taken the place of the traditional Hmong culture, and become a new culture of its own. Traditional animist practices, once viewed as a key component of Hmong culture are largely no longer accepted in many converted Hmong households. Some of the traditional practices performed by the Shamans are illegal in the United States, and many of them are at odds with traditional Christian beliefs. Since animist beliefs and Shamanistic practices were such an integral part of previous expressions of Hmong culture, the relinquishing of those practices helps to reinvent the cultural identity of Hmong who have converted. Savina Yang of Menomonie has had experiences with both ends of the religious spectrum. In her interview she went in to detail as to why she and her family converted. She explains:<sup>31</sup>

When we first got here, my husband was still doing the shamanism, and it was hard to do that practice here because it is a different community. After a year or so we converted to Christianity, but at that time it was still just my husband that wasn't a Christian.

Knowing that the elders don't want to change, they just didn't want to look forward towards the future. Since we are younger we want a brighter future, a good education, and with the Shamanism, we knew that it doesn't help, it doesn't do anything, so that is why we wanted a change in religion. With Shamanism we just felt that we were living in a dark life. There was no peace it was just very dark, whereas when we converted to Christianity there is more light, peace, and we are happier.

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<sup>31</sup> Savina Yang, interview by author, Menomonie, December 31st, 2016.

Jovy Her from Eau Claire also shares a close kinship with his fellow Christians, and that the connection that he feels with the church is one of the primary ways that he identifies himself. In his interview he stated I started church in the refugee camp. I was a young man. I used to join the youth group in the refugee camp. In this country I started going to church, and joining the people at church.”<sup>32</sup> When asked if he feels that the United States has altered Hmong culture, his response was “I used to be a Christian since I was in Laos and Thailand, and when I came to this country I started to go to church, so not much has changed for me. But I know many people that are non-Christian, and I think there has been a lot of change for them.”<sup>33</sup>

Animistic practices and the use of Shamans for spiritual and physical healing is still very prevalent in Hmong society, particularly in areas such as Minneapolis /St. Paul that has a significant sized Hmong community, and available resources and centers for them to practice their traditional ways. The Twin Cities are a host to a variety of different cultures, each with their own traditional way of maintaining their cultural heritage. In this manner, it is relatively well accepted for individuals to partake in these practices. Even in many hospitals, doctors who are familiar with Hmong spiritual and healthcare practices will often ask if the individual is seeing any other healers aside from themselves, and will generally try to work with the patient’s belief system. This approach is spoken of at great length in the article “Hmong Shamanism: Animist Spiritual Healing in Minnesota” which draws the following conclusion that<sup>34</sup>

The focused interviews suggest that shamanism is an active form of religious healing in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Shamanism appears to be considered effective care by many in the Hmong community. Some Hmong who see physicians continue to rely on shamans for their trusted healing skills and abilities to restore health and balance of the soul and body.

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<sup>32</sup> Jovy Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 13th, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Jovy Her, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 13th, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory A Platnikoff, "Hmong Shamanism: Animist Spiritual Healing in Minnesota." *Minnesota Medicine* Vol. 85 No. 6, (2002): 34.

In the interviews that were conducted with Minnesota residents, Shamanism is much more widely discussed than those that were interviewed in the Eau Claire area. There are several possibilities for this result. One is that the selection of interviewees from Eau Claire were largely Christian; two, is that Shamanism is more widely accepted and practiced in Minneapolis/St. Paul, possibly due to resources and demographics, as was explained previously, and three, that it is easier in highly populated areas to perform certain rituals such as animal sacrifices in a larger metropolitan area, than it is in a city the size of Eau Claire or Menomonie.

Whichever of the reasons it may be, those that practice shamanism are proud of their faith, and view it as an important part of their cultural identity. In an interview with a Hmong Shaman, they express how the individuals that they help often go to them first, and if the Shamanistic practices don't work, then they go to see a regular physician. In his interview Nhia Yer Yang mentions:<sup>35</sup>

As a shaman, I will be glad to help anyone. It doesn't matter what color they are; white, black, Hispanic. If infertile, I will help, and if they are sick I will help, whatever they need. I mentioned that for example the Christianity. They don't have a lot of respect for the spiritual belief of a shaman. If the Hmong get sick they go see a doctor. The people who believe in the spiritual, they come and get help from me.

Utilizing these traditional practices was more common in Laos, where there was not much access to decent hospitals. Since Hmong people still utilize them in the United States, where they have constant access to healthcare, this leads one to believe that the Shamanistic practices are a part of their cultural heritage and identity.

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<sup>35</sup> Nhia Yer Vang, interview by Minnesota Historical Society, Minneapolis, 1991.

## Acculturation

The Hmong refugees have had a more difficult time acculturating to the United States than many other recent ethnic immigrants. Part of this difficulty is due to the language barrier, while other parts of it have to do with the fact that many Hmong were not well educated in Laos, were largely illiterate, even of their own written language, and were mostly rural farmers and hunters, which have skill sets and lifestyles that don't necessarily transfer into American society very well. According to Jeremy Hein<sup>36</sup>

The transition from public assistance to employment that occurs for most refugees within the first few years after arrival is the beginning of a profound change in the meaning of work. Americans, particularly those in the resettlement program, equate self-sufficiency with employment. But refugees whose prior work experience was in agriculture find that employment in blue-collar or low-skill service jobs makes them feel less independent.

It is a massive adjustment from the lifestyle of living in mountain villages, completely dependent on your own skills, and the abilities of family and other members of your village to provide the necessities; to the focused, law driven, constant hustle and bustle that is typical American life, These cultural adjustments make it more difficult It is often cited in the interviews as the reason for choosing one location to reside in over another. Those living in the Eau Claire region, say disadvantages to living in more populous areas such as Minneapolis/St. Paul, instead opting for the smaller, more familiar lifestyle that they are able to achieve in Wisconsin. According to Wa Chao Yang "We wouldn't want to live in the Cities because it is such a busy city, the traffic, and housing is very expensive, so we would rather live in a smaller town like this. The resources we don't really care about, it is more about the living conditions."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Hein, *From Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia: A Refugee Experience in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), 140.

<sup>37</sup> Wa Chao Yang, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 6th, 2017.

This sentiment is reiterated in other interviews with Eau Claire area residents. Often, they cited that Minneapolis was too busy, too crowded, there was too much crime, they were afraid of gangs, etc. Savina Yang mentions this stating “We would have gone to Minneapolis because there were a lot more schools, but there wasn’t the money to do it. Another big thing was the gang activity in Minneapolis, and we were afraid of what that might cause.”<sup>38</sup> Considering everything that the Hmong had been through over the previous years before coming to the United States, the ability to feel safe seems to be one of the most important things when choosing an area to live. Mai Lor states this in her interview:<sup>39</sup>

Yes, I was very grateful that my family came to Wisconsin, because I feel it would be harder for my family to adjust if we were to have come to the city, like Minnesota, like a big city. I think Wisconsin, especially in Eau Claire, we felt safe, and we do have all the resource that we needed to help our families.

Hmong that settled in Minneapolis on the other hand, chose the big city experience for their own reasons. Often family living in the area was a major draw to the region, as was the case for Xai Thao “We were allowed to decide where to go. We had relatives who lived here so we decided to stay here in Minnesota. We arrived here in February 7th, 1985. We never moved out of here. It is a free land and there were no worries so I am happy to be here.”<sup>40</sup> The higher number of jobs is also cited as a primary reason for living in the large cities such as Minneapolis/St. Paul, as was the reason for Yaw Yang to move to the area, stating “There were not many jobs in Madison, so we moved to Minnesota. In Minnesota my children and daughters-in-law found good jobs.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Savina Yang, interview by author, Menomonie, December 31st, 2016.

<sup>39</sup> Mai Lor, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 21st, 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Xai Thao, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Yaw Yang, interview by Paul Hilmer, Minneapolis, 2015.

Location of residence is only one of the factors involved when choosing how to best acculturate into American society while still maintaining your own cultural heritage, which very few of the first-generation Hmong immigrants were willing to give up. You must also make the decision of what values and traditions you wish to hold on to from your previous country, and which ones you are willing to let go of. Some of them are easy to let go of, as there are quite a few Hmong traditions that are illegal in the United States. Other traditions and values are largely dependent on the age of the individual, and if they are a first or second-generation Hmong, The younger generation of Hmong have far more issues with traditional practices than their parents do. For instance, “Some women deplore the practice of kidnapping younger girls for marriage, the ‘pricing’ of brides, the sacrificing of animals, and the length of funerals.”<sup>42</sup>

When asked which values from the Hmong culture the interviewees wished to hold on to, and pass down to future generations, there were a few common responses. Respect for elders was one of the more prevalent, which is a very large part of Hmong culture. Taking care of the parents in old age is seen as the responsibility of the eldest son, and as such, they will typically live with their parents their entire lives, until the parents become too old to work, then the son

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<sup>42</sup> Franklin Ng. "From Laos to America: The Hmong Community in the United States." In *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, by Editor Huping Ling. (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008): 31

will step up and take care of the parents in their retirement. Mai Lor made a very thorough statement on this subject in her interview. In her view:<sup>43</sup>

I think in our culture, our last names are like family, so if you find a stranger, or if the stranger just happens to pass by your house, if their last name is Lor, it is the same as my last name, so they automatically are some sort of a relative. I value families more than anything, I think that is what makes you more complete. And when you value families, it is going to come down to you respect your mom and dad, your elderly, you take care of them when they are old because that is the culture. That is the reason we are having children. We love them when they are little, we nurture them, and as we get older the role is reverse. They are going to take care of their parents as they get older if they can't take care of themselves anymore.

This message is also mentioned in the Minneapolis interviews, though in these, it is also spoken of how the younger generation does not place the same emphasis on these traditional values as their parents do. The generally abide by the rules when around elders, for that is what is expected of them, but when they are not they tend to act in a more typical American fashion.

### Section 5 – Conclusion

Throughout the length of this research paper, it has been demonstrated how truly complex and difficult the diaspora experience of the Hmong has been. An entire people forced to leave their homeland, start from the ground up in a completely foreign country, learn a new language, and rebuild their culture, all while attempting to assimilate into a new culture while still maintaining their own heritage, makes them a truly unique ethnicity. It is difficult to fathom the challenges that have arisen through the process, and the endless toll it has taken on their families, their children, and themselves. As is with all studies of humans, there is no all-encompassing guidebook that applies to every Hmong in the midwest, as each individual experience is as

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<sup>43</sup> Mai Lor, interview by author, Eau Claire, January 21st, 2017.



unique as the individual. Though through the analysis presented, it is possible to discern some common factors and patterns that affected the migration and acculturation experience. The time period and location chosen by the Hmong to settle in did have an impact on the availability of resources, and educational opportunities for the Hmong to utilize. These factors also played a part in how they viewed maintaining their cultural identity, while acculturating into mainstream American culture.

Lack of proficiency in the English language has been shown as being one of the largest obstacles for a newly arrived Hmong refugee to overcome. When discussing education, the comparison between the experiences of the younger generation of Hmong shows that the individualized English language attention that Mai was able to receive in Eau Claire's smaller school structure, was significantly different from the attention that Fong and Lee received. Resources are limited in any school district, and if a school has 3000 children, with a half a dozen different ethnicity to try and assist with their English language acquisition, each ethnicity may not get the same amount of attention as someone that goes to a school with only 1000 students, and only two ethnicities needing the assistance. It has also been seen that earlier Hmong refugee youth had a more difficult time acquiring language skills than those that arrived later, because the curriculum to help these students learn English had not been created for Hmong people yet.

Adult refugees faced other challenges when first arriving in the United States. Those that arrived earlier were often former military, with more job-related skills, in some cases a knowledge of English, and more of an education. Those that arrived later due to economic hardships or Communist persecution were often farmers with little education, and agricultural skills that did not transfer over well into American practices. The type of job acquired by the Hmong refugees varied greatly as well. Many in Wisconsin went to technical college, often for English classes and blue-collar job skills, but the job market is much more limited than it is in the Twin Cities. Some individuals interviewed even mention

that they moved to the Twin Cities because there were more job prospects than there were in Wisconsin. Those that arrived in the Twin Cities region, would find a larger job market, even if only in factory or agricultural positions.

When discussing the subject of maintaining cultural identity; location, time period, and religious orientation all played their own parts in how different Hmong communities attempted to maintain their cultural identities. The earliest Hmong arrivals to the Twin Cities viewed the Hmong New Year as incredibly significant, not necessarily because of what it was in Laos, but because it gave them a chance to connect with other Hmong in the area. Those that arrived later, had usually spent time in one of the refugee camps in Thailand. These locations had a significant Christian Missionary presence, and many Hmong that stayed in the refugee camps would at some point turn away from the traditional animistic religion, in favor of the Christian or Catholic faith. To these individuals, they found their community connection with their church and its members. The New Year did not hold as high of a regard in their life, for their view of their community had shifted to their religious community.

Those that adopted the Christian faith also had a very different view of what Hmong cultural traditions to maintain, than their animistic counterparts did. They kept the traditions that coincided with their spiritual beliefs, while letting those that don't fade. The one common thread across the board of those that were interviewed that were Christian, is that the largest part of their cultural identity that they wish to pass on to future generations is their language. Aside from that, many Hmong embrace the adoption of American culture.

In the discussion of acculturation in to American society, the primary factors that determined how much of American culture they were willing to incorporate into their lives, were the lifestyles that the Hmong individual had in Laos, which location in the midwest that an

individual settled in, and which generation of Hmong they are. Those that chose to live in Eau Claire were often not among the first wave that came to the United States in the mid-to-late 1970s. These later refugees went through the journey of crossing the Mekong River to Thailand, and often spent a number of years in a Thai refugee camp. Their primary focus was on the safety for their family, and being away from the larger communities. This would enable them to live in a quieter community. Those that chose to live in Minneapolis did so for job prospects and families being in the area. In each instance the Hmong families were willing to sacrifice something, in order to gain something else.

It is also clear that the level of which the Hmong choose to acculturate into American society is impacted by the age of the individual. Those that are first generation refugees which are typically older do not wish to acculturate as much as their younger brethren. The second and third generation Hmong are much more willing to acculturate, as they have grown up here their whole lives. Depending on the level in which their parents acculturated, usually will dictate how much of traditional Hmong culture they are knowledgeable of. As with any study of human beings, there is usually not one set of rules that defines them all. There are exceptions, as has been seen with the participants of this study. But to understand why certain Hmong have integrated into American society differently than others, you can gain an understanding of what were the strengths and shortcomings of the programs designed to help these people, and why refugee populations choose one area to live in over another.

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# Appendix A – Interview Questions

1– What was the trip like from Laos or Thailand to the United States? Where did you travel to? Why did you choose to come to Wisconsin in the first place?

2 – When you arrived in the Wisconsin area what was your experience like in this new environment that had a lot of different ethnic groups? Did you feel out of place, or were there other people that you knew within the area that helped you feel more comfortable? Friends or Family members?

3 – When you first arrived, were there any groups, churches or organizations that helped you become more comfortable and knowledgeable about the area? Do you still keep in contact with any of them?

4 – What were the most difficult parts about adapting to your new environment, i.e. different weather, more vehicles, rules to obey etc.?

5 – What has been the most difficult part of adapting to this new country and culture? The language barriers, the complicated legal, medical, and financial systems?

6 – Do you think that the area that you chose to move to had a positive or negative impact on how easy it was to adapt to living in the United States? Do you think, in hindsight, that another location might have been better?

7 – What kind of employment or schooling have you had since coming to the United States? Were there certain factors that affected what kind of jobs you held, or whether or not you decided to go to school?

8 – Has the traditional role of a father or mother changed since arriving in the United States?

9 – How is the process of raising children in the United States different from your home country?

10 – Have you tried to continue to hold on to the daily activities that you performed in Laos, such as gardening, sewing, hunting, community gatherings etc.?

11 – Has living in the United States changed the Hmong culture for you, and others you know that live in the area?

12 - Do you view the United States as being freer than Laos or Thailand?

13 – What is the biggest thing you want to leave behind for your children to remember about Hmong culture?

14 – Do you think that there are certain values within Hmong culture that should be passed down to younger generations? Do you think others feel this way?

15 – Do you still wish to ever return to Laos, or are you happier now in the United States?

16 - Do you still have any family in Laos or Thailand? If given the opportunity, would they like to come over here, or are they happier over there? Does that affect how you feel about your own situation in the United States?



17 – What would you like to say to anyone who might listen to this recording years from now? Is there anything that you would want them to know?

## Appendix B – Interview Transcripts

Name: Savina Yang

Interviewer: William Ericson

Translator/s: Tommy Lor, Soua Yang

The following interview took place in Savina Yang's home in Menomonie, WI on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.

1. Would you please state your name and when it is that you came to the United States?

My name is Savina Yang and we came to the United States, to Menomonie in 1993, December 17<sup>th</sup>.

2. What was the trip like from Laos or Thailand to the United States? Why did you choose to come to Wisconsin?

As refugees we were in Ban Vinai camp for 17 years. During that time, everybody was pretty poor, and living conditions were not that great. A lot of the elders didn't want to come to the States. There was a lot of negativity on coming to the United States with the elders. One of the reasons why a lot of the elders didn't want to come over was because, in Laos, it was a land of freedom. They kind of just did whatever they wanted. As soon as we went to the refugee camps it was a place where we had to make really big decisions, and we didn't know what was going to happen next. We really wanted to go back to Laos and live the life that we always knew. So I think that was one of the reasons why a lot of the elder's didn't want to come. One of the reasons why a lot of people stayed in the camp so long is because they were hoping, and always waiting for some sort of way back into Laos.

One of the big incentives for why we eventually came to the United States was that a lot of the camps were being closed, so we were given an ultimatum of we either go to this area or another country. We had to make a lot of big decisions. Since it was usually only the elders who wanted to stay, a lot of the younger people like me wanted to come to the States. At that time my parents were already in the States, so they were the ones that were encouraging us to come. Once Ban Vinai closed we went to [Ban Huay Nam Khao camp?] for 3 years, and that is when we started the process of coming over.

The main reasons we chose Wisconsin is that my parents were already in the States and they lived in Menomonie, WI. They were the closest direct relatives, so that was the main reason why we came here.

3. When you arrived in the Wisconsin area what was your experience like in this new environment? Did you feel out of place, or were there other people that you knew within the area that helped you feel more comfortable?

When we first came to the States, I was really excited and happy because I was separated from my family for so long. My husband felt the opposite because he left behind all of his family in Thailand. It was a lot harder for him to get used to everything. It was really hard to assimilate to the culture, the rules, and the social norms. Driving was a really big thing too. One of the difficulties was, when my kids were younger, trying to take them to the hospital. Menomonie is such a small town, there weren't really any good translators, so when we had to go to the hospital we just had to kind of work with what we had.

4. When you first arrived, were there any groups, churches or organizations that helped provide resources, or become more comfortable and knowledgeable about the area? Do you still keep in contact with any of them?

When we first came there were programs to help us with food stamps, and a lot of the financial needs. There was a church in one of the nearby smaller towns that also helped with things like blankets. Being in a small town like Menomonie, we didn't get as much help in comparison to bigger cities.

5. What has been the most difficult part of adapting to this new country and culture?

The two hardest things were the difficulties with communication, the language barrier, and also the finances. Coming here and having nothing at all, and just starting from the ground up.

6. When you first came to the country, how did you start out from having nothing, to having a home, and a job?

When we first came, the state provided funds. We got about 700 dollars, but that pretty much just covered the basics. After a little bit over a year of being in the States, there was about 6 of us, and so we also got food stamps. We got about 400 dollars for that too. Basically after bills and everything, there wasn't much left.

7. Did you receive any kind of job training or education to help get jobs here?

Since there were four of the children that were still young when we came over to the States, I was the main person that took care of the kids. My husband was able to go to school for about a year, but after that year, through Human Services and the Job Center, they pretty much

told everyone to go out and find a job. They stopped the education. My husband has been working ever since then.

They also did have driving lessons, so that really helped with my husband so that he could transport us and take us everywhere.

8. Looking back, do you think that another location might have been better, or that you would have chosen someplace different like Minneapolis?

Well my parents lived in Menomonie so I would want to stay in Menomonie, but Menomonie doesn't have any programs to help. So a lot of people that came over moved to a different state or a different city. We decided that we wanted to go too, but we waited for a little while.

When we came to Menomonie it was 1993, and I was 21, and my husband was 22, so we were over age so we never went to high school. We just went to the technical college in Menomonie. At that time a lot of people were poor, and we didn't have money to pay the bills. If we needed to buy a car we don't have the money or a credit score, so we decided to go, but it was hard to, so that is why we stayed in Menomonie. We would have gone to Minneapolis because there were a lot more schools, but there wasn't the money to do it. Another big thing was the gang activity in Minneapolis, and we were afraid of what that might cause.

9. How has living in the United States changed the traditional role of a father or mother, or is the process of raising children different?

When we first got here, my husband was still doing the shamanism, and it was hard to do that practice here because it is a different community. After a year or so we converted to Christianity, but at that time it was still just my husband that wasn't a Christian. With child rearing, it is so much easier here because there is so much access here to better food and formula, whereas back then it was just breast milk.

10. Have you tried to continue to hold on to the activities that you performed in Laos, such as gardening, sewing, hunting, community gatherings etc.?

When I came here I didn't really know how to garden, but my parents did so I learned gardening from my parents while living here. Here we are able to grow more crops, versus in Thailand we grew barley and rice and that was pretty much it. The reason why we still garden is just for the extra income.

11. Has living in the United States changed the Hmong culture for you, and others you know that live in the area?

Knowing that the elders don't want to change, they just didn't want to look forward towards the future. Since we are younger we want a brighter future, a good education, and with the Shamanism, we knew that it doesn't help, it doesn't do anything, so that is why we wanted a change in religion. With Shamanism we just felt that we were living in a dark life. There was no peace it was just very dark, whereas when we converted to Christianity there is more light, peace, and we are happier.

12. What is the biggest thing you want to leave behind for your children to remember about Hmong culture? Do you want them to hold more on to traditional Hmong culture, or do you want them to more embrace American culture?

Being here in the States, both cultures we desire for our children to embrace, but being Christian has become a big focus of what I want for my kids to have.

13. Do the values of Hmong culture and American culture ever come in to conflict with each other where you have to pick one or the other?

The biggest conflict is probably the religious piece of it, where Shamanism is very different from American beliefs.

14. Do you still wish to ever return to Laos, or are you happier now in the United States?

We don't want to live in Laos any more. We just got back from visiting there a little while ago, but to go back and live there, probably not. We wouldn't want to go back because it is still kind of poor, bad living conditions, not a lot of freedom there, and there aren't any good hospitals or education there. In Laos and Thailand, they only care about their own people, they don't care about the Hmong people. For my husband and I the thing that we wish for the most is for the freedom and the peace, and just having love within the family.

15. Do you still have any family in Laos or Thailand? If given the opportunity, would they like to come over here, or are they happier over there? Does that affect how you feel about your own situation in the United States?

My husband still has two sisters that live in Thailand, and his parents came to the Cities with the wave of Hmong refugees that came in 2004, when they shut down all of the camps. From my family, I only have an Aunt that still lives in Thailand. They do want to come, but since they already have their life established there, and with a big family it is hard for them to come.

16. What would you like to say to anyone who might listen to this recording years from now? Is there anything that you would want them to know?

The first thing is just understanding the difficulty of not having an education and the ability to learn, and we haven't had a lot of opportunities being here in the beginning. The second one is the hardship of the fighting, and how different it is to be here as a refugee as compared to someone who has been here for a while, who has grown up here. The last thing is the difficulty of being a Hmong person here and assimilating to the American culture.

17. Is there anything else that you would like to add before we end the interview?

Still to this day, one of the saddest things is that we still rely on our kids for translation. We kind of wanted to be more independent, but the language barrier is hindering us.

Name/s: Wa Chao Yang & Kia Lor Yang

Interviewer: William Ericson

Translator: Soua Yang

The following interview took place in the home of Wa Chao and Kia Yang in Chippewa Falls, WI on January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

1. Would you please state your name and when it is that you came to the United States?

Wa Chao: My name is Wa Chao Yang, and I came to this country in 1985, February 25<sup>th</sup>.

Kia: My name is Kia Lor Yang, and I came at the same time.

2. When you first came to the United States, why did you choose to come to Wisconsin?

Wa Chao: The first place that I had been was Denver, Colorado. My uncle was living in Wisconsin, he came to meet my family, and said to come here and live in Wisconsin.

3. When you first arrived, were there any groups, churches or organizations that helped you become more comfortable and knowledgeable about the area?

Wa Chao: Yes, I think we had some organizations to help in Wisconsin. We also had my uncle and cousin out here to help me at times.

Kia: When we were in Colorado a Mormon Church helped us, but when we moved to Wisconsin it was just our cousins and uncle that helped us. The uncle taught us how to drive.

4. What were the most difficult parts about adapting to living in the United States from Laos and Thailand?

Wa Chao: Not knowing the language, and not knowing how to drive were the two hardest things.

5. Do you think that the area that you chose to move to had a positive or negative impact on how easy it was to adapt to living in the United States? Do you think, if you could go back and do it again, that you might choose someplace different?



Wa Chao: The easy part of living in Eau Claire is that we had relatives here. My uncle and cousins were already here so they were able to help us out. If we were to go back in time, no matter where we lived it would all still be the same. We would just have to adapt to the situation.

6. Do you think that if you would have moved to someplace like Minneapolis/St. Paul you would have gotten more help, or have more programs available? Did Eau Claire have any programs to help learn English, help with schooling, or help get jobs?

Wa Chao: We wouldn't want to live in the Cities because it is such a busy city, the traffic, and housing is very expensive, so we would rather live in a smaller town like this. The resources we don't really care about, it is more about the living conditions.

7. Were there certain factors that affected what kind of jobs you held, such as lack of schooling?

Wa Chao: Back then, the job market didn't really require a diploma, or anything like that. As long as you had the skills, then they would hire you, so that didn't really matter to us. But now it is a lot harder to get a job because they do require for you to get certifications, diploma's GED, and all of that stuff, so it is a lot harder now. But just living here we are pretty much accustomed to living in this country, so it doesn't really affect us.

8. Has the traditional role of a father or mother changed since living in the United States?

Wa Chao: Compared to living in Laos and Thailand, the roles over there are different. The dad had the ability to go to school and get an education, whereas the wife has to stay at home and do all of the housework and chores. So back then they didn't get the opportunity to go to school, whereas here, we both have equal roles. We both go to work, we both have the opportunity to go to school, so it is more of an equal opportunity.

9. Is it different to raise children here than it was in your home country?

Kia: Raising children in Laos and Thailand it is hard to get the necessary things that babies need, like food formula, and all that, but the children over there will respect the parents more. Here there is easy access to get all of the things that you need for a baby, but children are harder to discipline. They don't listen to parents. They are more rebellious.

10. Have you tried to continue to hold on to the daily activities that you performed in Laos, such as gardening, sewing, hunting, community gatherings etc.?

Kia: Gardening is still the same, and I still sew Hmong clothing. We converted to Christianity, so we don't do the old Shamanism stuff. We still do gatherings every once in a while. One thing that has changed is that we used to do two big gatherings, one during the New Year, and the other for the first harvest of the season. Nowadays it is just your immediate family that we gather with, versus all of the relatives coming.

11. Has living in the United States changed the Hmong culture for you, and others you know that live in the area?

Wa Chao: Yeah a lot. Two of the biggest changes is that back then to get our food we would have to go to the garden and harvest all of our food. That is how we ate. Here now we can just go to the grocery store, and it is easier to get our food. We don't have to work for our food the same anymore.

Kia: Living in Laos and Thailand, guys stay at home and women do more of the housework. We worked more than the men. Living here it is equal opportunity, we are both viewed as the same. No one is going to work harder than the other. Also, back then if we wanted to go somewhere we had to walk, whereas here we can just drive. In Laos we were skinny, and very healthy. Here we have high blood pressure and diabetes. In Laos we didn't have people with high blood pressure or diabetes. In Laos if I want to come visit you, I walk all day. If we don't get there in one day we have to sleep in the jungle.

12. Do you view the United States as being freer than Laos or Thailand?

Wa Chao: Yes, over here there is a lot more freedom. You can go anywhere you want without asking for permission, or not being allowed to go there. You can believe in whatever you want to in this country.

Kia: Back then the Laotian and Thai people didn't really bother the Hmong people, but nowadays there are more restrictions for the Hmong people.

13. What is the biggest thing you want to leave behind for your children to remember about Hmong culture?

Wa Chao: Knowing our language. Knowing the Hmong Language. Knowing your relatives, like your uncles, your cousins, and knowing your people and who you are related to.

Kia: Hmong clothes. But the most important is to keep the language alive

14. Do you still wish to ever return to Laos, or are you happier now in the United States?

Wa Chao: We are just happier here. It is free. You can go anywhere you want.

Kia: Even though we don't have a land to garden, living here is cleaner. Better hospitals here, and medication.

15. Do you still have any family in Laos or Thailand? If given the opportunity, would they like to come over here, or are they happier over there?

Kia: Oh they want to come here, but they can't. They are not allowed.

Wa Chao: We still have a lot of relatives that live in Laos, we don't have anyone that lives in Thailand anymore. They do want to come over here, but the government, the United States, won't allow them to come here anymore because there is no law, or Bill. When we came over it was because of refugee status, but now they don't have that anymore so they are not allowed to come.

16. What would you like to say to anyone who might listen to this recording years from now? Is there anything that you would want them to know?

Wa Chao: It will be nice to keep this recording so that our grandchildren would be able to hear our story, know who we are, and know where we, and the Hmong people came from so that the Hmong culture doesn't die.

Name: Jovy Her

Interviewer: William Ericson

Translator/s: N/A

The following interview took place in Jovy Her's home in Eau Claire, WI on January 13<sup>th</sup> 2017.

1. Would you please state your name and when it is that you came to the United States?

My name is Jovy Her, actually my previous name is Vang Her, and I came to the United States in 1990 in December.

2. Why did you choose to come and live in Wisconsin?

Well because my mother-in-law, and my brother-in-law, they were over here, and they sponsored me over here.

3. When you first arrived, were there any groups, churches or organizations that helped you become more comfortable and knowledgeable about the area?

Yeah, there were some organizations, but the most part would be just our relatives. They were here first. They knew where to go and what to do.

4. Did you get any government assistance when you first arrived? Did they help with food or bills, or was it all just family?

Yes, we got medical assistance, and food share, like a food stamp program from the government. It lasted quite a few years, until you find a job.

5. Did they offer you any kind of job training?

Yes, they had a program at the Technical school, for you to go and learn some English. They called it ESL, or English as a Second Language. I went through that, and then after that I got into a program, a school.

6. What has been the most difficult part of adapting to this new country and culture?

Well, coming to this country, the most difficult part was...when I was in Laos I used to live in the mountains and I didn't have a dream that I could buy a car. So when I got to this country, anywhere you want to go you have to have a ride, or drive a car, so that's the most difficult part that I had. You have to have money to buy a car, you have to get your driver's license to drive a car, so it was really hard. And the winter time is cold too, so you can't walk anywhere. We came in December, so it was pretty snowy, and it was really cold.

7. Do you think that choosing to live in Eau Claire was helpful in adapting to the United States, or do you think that if you would have gone somewhere else like Minneapolis or St. Paul that it would have been easier for you?

Yeah, I think that Eau Claire has pretty good resources too. It was really helpful here.

8. Has the traditional role of a father or mother changed since arriving in the United States?

It is a lot different here than in Laos and Thailand. Here you only can talk to them in a nice way. Back in Laos and Thailand they have a way of teaching, or if someone doesn't listen to you, you can punish them. But here, you can only just talk to them in a nice way.

9. Is it different to raise children here? Is it easier or harder?

I think that it is easier to raise children here, because here they have a lot better medical things, and all kinds of medicine to help kids grow much better. I have three kids from Thailand. When we were in Thailand, they got sick all of the time, and we have no medication for kids. But here kids grow much better. Too many people in a small area over there. Kids and elderly people get sick, and there is no medication or good hospitals.

10. Do children act differently towards their parents here than they do there? Are they more independent?

Here in the U.S., kids are more independent. Back in our country, Laos, Thailand, you can control them much better than here. Here is more freedom for kids.

11. Have you tried to continue to hold on to the daily activities that you performed in Laos, such as gardening, hunting, and community gatherings etc.?

Back in our country, every New Year we can't wait until the New Year festival. When you are young, you have so much fun seeing the New Year festival. In this country, in the U.S., I don't go to the New Year festival a whole lot. I spend most of my time going to church, and being involved in the church.

12. Were you involved in the church in Laos and Thailand, or did you start that over here?

I started church in the refugee camp. I was a young man. I used to join the youth group in the refugee camp. In this country I started going to church, and joining the people at church.

13. Has living in the United States changed the Hmong culture for you, and others you know that live in the area?

I used to be a Christian since I was in Laos and Thailand, and when I came to this country I started to go to church, so not much has changed for me. But I know many people that are non-Christian, and I think there has been a lot of change for them.

14. Do you think that the United States is more free than Laos and Thailand?

Oh yes. The United States is more free. When I used to live in Laos and Thailand, you go anywhere, if you travel anywhere, you travel to Minnesota, you travel anywhere, town to town city to city, you have to have like a passport or a permit to travel. Some kind of ID card, something like that. You have to have something to prove to go to another town, to another city. Here as long as you legally live in the United States you can go anywhere. California, New York, anywhere. Life here has a lot more freedom.

In Laos, you can go hunting, you don't have to go and buy a license to hunt. You just carry your gun and go into the jungle and shoot anything you see. Any animals, big ones, small ones. Things like hunting and fishing, there is more freedom over there, but that is something that is not good for the country either. You shoot the big ones, the small ones, and they don't last many years. Pretty soon they are all gone. Here the government have very good management and planning for hunting, fishing. You can hunt, fish, and there are many more animal's year after year after year. So, I like it better out here.

15. What is the biggest thing you want to leave behind for your children to remember about Hmong culture?

Actually, I want my kids to know my language. I don't want them to forget my language. I want them to know how to speak my language, and actually my culture...I am a Christian so Christianity here and in Thailand are the same thing. There is not much different about culture, but language is what I want my kids to hold on to.

16. Do you think that there are certain values within Hmong culture that should be passed down to younger generations?

Yeah. It is kind of hard in this country. When kids live in this country they cannot do things like the others do in this country. I want them to take care of me so that I don't have to go to a nursing home. Kids now, they can adapt to living in this country, so not quite sure what they want to do for me, but I want them to take good care of me.

17. Do you still wish to ever return to Laos, or are you happier now in the United States?

Oh, I am happy here. Go back to Laos maybe just for a visit, but to live there. No, no I don't want to live there anymore.

18. Do you still have any family in Laos or Thailand? If given the opportunity, would they like to come over here, or are they happier over there?

Yeah. They want to be here, but there is no way they can be here.

19. What would you like to say to anyone who might listen to this recording years from now? Is there anything that you would want them to know?

I know that Hmong people are, well for myself, I am happy that our people have a chance to come to this country and see a lot of things that we haven't seen in Thailand and Laos. We have learned a lot of new stuff here. In this country, the government organized and planned for this country a lot better than back in our country. So, I am so happy to be in this country. I think our people, the Hmong people, most of these people like to be here. We are happy to be here. There are a lot more people that get divorced in this country, but I don't think that this is a problem for me.

Name: Mai Lor

Interviewer: William Ericson

Translator/s: N/A

The following interview took place in Mai Lor's home in Eau Claire, WI on January 21<sup>st</sup> 2016.

1. Would you please state your name and when it is that you came to the United States?

My name is Mai, last name is Lor. We came to the United States in May of 1986.

2. Why did you choose to come to Wisconsin?

Well, the reason is because my oldest sister and her husband was here in Wisconsin. They came like 2 years before us, so that's the reason why we came to Wisconsin.

3. What family members did you come with?

I came with my mom, my two brothers, and myself.

4. When you first arrived, were there any groups, churches or organizations that helped you with finances or resources?

Yes, there was. Actually, my brother-in-law Chao and my sister Kia, they were the ones that sponsored us. They weren't working yet, so they actually asked a church, and that church, they helped sponsor my family. It was an American church, the one by Kmart.

5. What was your experience like when you first arrived here. Did you feel out of place, were you excited, or were you more just unsure what to make of it?

Well, I was not scared because I grew up in Thailand. I was born in Laos, but I grew up in Thailand, so hearing stories about war in Laos is always so scary for me. So, I was actually really, really happy when we came to America, when we came to Wisconsin. I felt safe, and a little scared because of the language and the cultures, but it didn't matter, I felt safe.



6. What were the most difficult parts about adapting to your new environment?

Well, I think in Wisconsin it was pretty much the weather, the winter, especially since we don't have weather like winter where we came from, and so it was very hard for my family. And then I think that some are easy and some are hard. I think it is also the language barrier that was hard for my family, and for myself.

7. Was there any place that helped you learn English? Did you learn it in school or have tutors?

Um, no we learned everything from school. But there were special classes for us, ESL.

8. How old were you when you started school here?

Well we came to the U.S. when I was 8, but we had to stay in a camp close to Thailand's capital city. We stayed there for 8 months to learn the basic English, and to learn how to be safe when it comes to using electricity, because where we came from we had no electricity, and using the toilet and the faucet. So, we stayed there for 8 months, and by the time that we got to the U.S., I turned 9 years old.

9. Were there programs within the school specifically for Hmong children? Were the teachers knowledgeable or helpful, or were they unsure on what to do with you?

They were very helpful. When I was in my first 3 years in school, I would go to the normal class, and then half of that day I would spend with my ESL teacher.

10. Do you think that moving to Wisconsin had a positive or negative impact on how easy it was to adapt to living in the United States? Do you think, in hindsight, that another location might have been better?

Yes, I was very grateful that my family came to Wisconsin, because I feel it would be harder for my family to adjust if we were to have come to the city, like Minnesota, like a big city. I think Wisconsin, especially in Eau Claire, we felt safe, and we do have all of the resource that we needed to help our families.

11. After you got out of grade school and high school, were there any special programs that helped you with job training, or by that time were you pretty used to the United States and didn't need any assistance?

Well, there are a lot of programs offered, but because you have family, and you have children, you put your family first, so you never take that chance, or that opportunity at times to get the help.

12. Has the traditional role of a father or mother changed since arriving in the United States?

In a way it's different, and in a way it's not. In Laos, or just the way we were brought up, we pretty much have to learn how to do everything. Over here with our kids we have time to love them, and we work but we have a job, we don't have to go out and work all day and come home and just sleep. Nowadays it's a little different because, as a parent, I never stop talking about how important education is, especially in this country. But in my country, it was different. My grandma, my mom, as soon as the second time that the rooster crows, we had to get up. Cook, clean, bring water, but never talk about education. In this country, when you love your children it is softer and more gentle. In our country, discipline is supposed to make you better kids, a better person. So I actually like it in this country how we parent our kids, but we try not to spoil them much.

13. Has living in the United States changed the Hmong culture for you, and others you know that live in the area?

Yeah, I am kind of scared because we are changing. Even myself, growing up in Laos, and growing up in Thailand, I came over here when I was 9 years old, I compare myself with the way that I do things, it is even a little different from my sister, or your mom, or dad, or Bli (older sister), just because I grew up over here. I am kind of losing the Hmong culture a little bit, and so yeah, it is changing. I feel a little scared because our kids probably won't know about our history and our culture. I feel that maybe in the future our great grandkids probably have to go back into our Hmong text to look and learn about our history and our ways.

14. Do you view the United States as being freer than Laos or Thailand?

Yes I do. I never really suffered from war, never had to run and hide in a cave like how my mom, my brothers, my sisters, but just from hearing stories from my mom it was very very scary. So definitely the U.S. is more free. I think it is better than any other country. You have to be super lucky to live in the United States.

15. Do you think that there are certain values within Hmong culture that should be passed down to younger generations?

In a way. Kind of mixed. I do value families. I think in our culture, our last names are like family, so if you find a stranger, or if the stranger just happens to pass by your house, if their last name is Lor, it is the same as my last name, so they automatically are some sort of a relative. I value families more than anything, I think that is what makes you more complete. And when you value families, it is going to come down to you respect your mom and dad, your elderly, you take care of them when they are old because that is the culture. That is the reason we are having children. We love them when they are little, we nurture them, and as we get older the role is reverse. They are going to take care of their parents as they get older if they can't take care of themselves anymore.

16. Do you still wish to ever return to Laos, or are you happier now in the United States?

Not to return permanently, but I would like to maybe go visit, because even if it is not our country, in a way we were there. The country doesn't belong to us, we just migrated there, but in a way it is our country. It is where my parents, my grandma and grandpa lived. I don't know anything about Laos, only stories from my mom. When I was born, the war had already started, and after my father was killed, my mom took us to Thailand and I was barely 3 years old. I did pretty much all of my growing up in Thailand. I love Thailand, I miss it, once in a while I still dream about it. But the camp that we were living in is gone now. I doesn't exist anymore, but I think that is one of the places I would really like to go back and visit, but what is the point when there is nobody there anymore. But I do want to go back to Laos and visit. I want to go to places that my mom and dad have lived before. Maybe someday go to the village that my dad got killed at just to see where my family came from.

17. Do you still have any family in Laos or Thailand? If given the opportunity, would they like to come over here, or are they happier over there?

Yeah I do. My dad's side of the family, my uncle's children. There are like 2 cousins that live in Thailand, but they are illegal and they are hiding every day. One of my cousins, he got caught and the Thai authority took him. Because he was illegal, and in the camp, they turned him back to the Laos authority, and we haven't even heard from him ever since. His family hasn't seen him ever since. We believe that they killed him. We still have cousins that live in Laos too. Other than that we are all here.

My Uncle, you know how there were those Hmong guerilla, the Lao people were announcing all over Laos that if they just surrendered, bring their family and children and surrender to the Lao authorities, then they will keep them safe from the North Vietnamese. They would be free, and they would be taken care of, but then they lied. So, when all of my cousins

and family surrendered, they [Lao] pretended to be nice and kind to them, but slowly they were taken one by one, the father, the brother, and they would just kill them silently. That is why my two cousins were so afraid, they moved their family and crossed Thailand's border. They live in Thailand illegally, hiding every day, but for some reason one of my cousins got caught.

18. What would you like to say to anyone who might listen to this recording years from now? Is there anything that you would want them to know?

Well, for myself, I don't really have that much to say, but I think it's very important to embrace this country. Be the very best that you can be. Don't ever forget where you came from, know your history, and don't ever forget.