Documenting the Work Experiences of Hmong Refugees

**Introduction:**

A team of Hmong students interviewed Hmong elders to record their stories about their early years in the U.S., with a focus on the elders’ labor market experiences. It was difficult for many Hmong refugees to find jobs after they arrived in the U.S., so their economic progress was slow, on average. These interviews provided examples of the challenges refugees encountered, the tradeoffs they faced between work and family, and their gradual progress over time.

**Purpose of Research:**

In the interviews in this project, Hmong elders shared the stories behind the statistical data. We are not aware of any previous scholarly work that has paired econometric analysis of refugees’ labor market experiences with qualitative data from interviews about work histories.

**How we conducted our Research:**

In this project, students interviewed Hmong elders to learn more about their work experiences in their early years in the U.S. Interviews provided insights about the challenges that faced Hmong refugees in general. With permission of the elders, interviews were transcribed and archived, so they can be shared with other students and scholars on campus and in the broader Hmong community. Insights from the interviews may be incorporated into later scholarly work on the Hmong community.

**Target Interviewees:**

We geared our research interviews towards Hmong elders when they were young adults settling as refugees in the U.S. The idea is to collect their stories to grasp a better understanding behind statistical data. These are some of the questions we asked translated from English to Hmong.

**Interview Question ex. (English and Hmong):**

**English:** How did your life experiences before you came to the U.S. prepare you for your first job here?

**Hmong:** Ua ntej koj tuaj teb chaws Meska, koj puas tua uj tam khoom uas tua pab koj npaj rau koj thawj txoj haujlwm?

**English:** In what year did you arrive in the U.S.? How old were you then? Who arrived with you?

**Hmong:** Koj tuaj txog teb chaws Meskas tham lu thyo twg. Koj muaj pes tsaww thyo tham kuj tuaj? Leetj twg nrog koj tuaj?

**Interview Experience:**

Sarah Her was able to interview her grandma Cheng and how she had to work at the factories with minimal pay to support her family, in Wausau, WI. Henry Thao also, was able to interview his grandparents Song Xiong and Mai Vang-Xiong where they described their work/life experiences from Laos, Thailand, and the United States.

**Researching (Interviews):**

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**Research Findings:**

1st Entry Level Jobs:
- Factory Worker
- Janitorial/ Housekeeper

Other Jobs:
- Farmer’s Markets (Gardening)
- Paj Ntaub (Hmong Sewing)
- Sold livestock

Brought their entire savings from Thailand to the U.S.

**Interviewee’s Response:**

Henry Thao: hais thiaj koj mus pes tsaww xyoo los tham ntawd koj tuaj thob es koj nrog leej twg tuaj xwb os ( ...tell how old you were and when you came who did you come with?) *Asking his grandma Mai Vang-Xiong* - Hmong Daw (White)

Mai Vang-Xiong: Xyoo cuaj cuam peb lub kaum ob bli ntuj peb tuaj pob rau pob huv Eau Claire ntaj osv peb yeej tis mus qhov twg li nawb. Pob tuaj pob huv Eau Claire nauv no ces, no kuv tuaj pug tim ub tuaj ces kuv yeej tis mus paub ntawb paub ntawv, tis paub dabi le ces tuaj txug teb chaw no tes yeej tuaj ua haujlwm xwb. (In Dec. 1993, we were put into E.C., we didn’t go anywhere else. Once we were put into E.C., since I came from back then (Thailand) I didn’t have any education, didn’t know anything, once I arrived then I just came to just work.) - Hmong Ntsuab/Leeg (Green)

**How this research benefitted us and others:**

The primary goal in this research was to learn more about the labor market experiences of Hmong refugees. Another important goal to create opportunities for us as Hmong students to connect with Hmong elders and to practice our Hmong language skills. We’re looking forward to more interviews in the future with our elders.

**Approval and Funding for Research:**

Over the course of first semester, the team of Hmong students and faculty worked together to put together a questionnaire for their interviews and then translated it into Hmong. The students and faculty also worked hard to get the IRB proposal passed, which was approved in December. The students were funded by the Diversity Mentoring Program for their Hmong Oral History Project.