This is the oral history of Bounyong and Christine Inthachith. Through two interviews, Professor Ian Cohead and I asked questions about Bounyong and Christine’s flight from Luang Prabang, Laos to Madison, Wisconsin. In this report, I cover the conditions under which the Inthachiths left in 1980, their resettlement in Madison, and their dedication to education. In efforts of transparency, my identity as a Southeast Asian adoptee may alter my ability to be an impartial observer of the Inthachith’s story.

Timeline

1976
Bounyong last visited her husband

1980, June-Sept.
Nongkhai Refugee Camp, Thailand

Manila Refugee Camp, the Philippines

1980, Dec. 31st, 12 am
Arrive in Madison, Wisconsin

1981-1982
Stay with sponsors from Catholic Relief Services

1990, Jan.-1994
Opened and closed Lao Laan-Xang on Odana Road

1997-Present
Reopened Lao Laan-Xang on Willy Street

2005-Present
Opened second location on Atwood Avenue

Pre-departure

Bounyong was born in Oudomxay and grew up in Luang Prabang, just down the Mekong River in Northern Laos. In Luang Prabang, Bounyong’s family were merchants, selling goods from their home. Due to her mother’s Tai Dón and her father’s Chinese ancestry and also from trading in the market, Bounyong is fluent in seven languages including; Tai Dón, Chinese, Hmong, and Lao. Bounyong recalls her life as a homemaker, similar to her own mother who was married at 14 years. Christine stresses that she would have not received the same education if her family remained in Laos. Promoting educational opportunities drives both Bounyong and Christine in their work today.

Bounyong made the choice to relocate her family in June of 1980. Her decision was very brave; for her family endured separation and uncertainty in every step of the exodus. Unbeknownst to her parents, Bounyong paid for a boat to cross her three oldest children over the Lao-Thai border on the Mekong from Vientiane to Nongkhai, where some of her sisters had already fled. At that time, Christine was eight years old and the oldest of the three kids. Separated from her mother, this is her recollection upon crossing:

“When we crossed and got closer to the Thai border, I jumped off. The three of us just swimming, pretending like we were Thai children.”
Upon arriving at the Nongkhai refugee camp, a major fire separated Christine from her siblings and her aunts. Left alone with no money and no means to call, a tuk-tuk driver found Christine in the middle of the night and took her to her relatives. At this time, Bounyong was still in Luang Prabang with her two-year-old son, trying to sell off property and other possessions. When Bounyong heard the news of the fire, she cried and prayed silently at night so her parents would not hear. She left for Vientiane the very next morning. Once reunified in Nongkhai, her husband’s name expedited their resettlement process to America. Recalling her luck, Bounyong stayed in Nongkhai for three months to move to Manila for three more until permanently resettling in the States. Christine describes a certain uncertainty of the people in Manila—just waiting; for supplies, for sponsorships, or for news of loved ones. In December of 1980, their names were called and they were flown out of Manila to land in Madison on New Year’s Day.

Resettlement

As one of the ten Lao families first resettled in Madison, the Inthachitchs uniquely experienced sponsorship, career and business-building, and acculturation. Their time has been marked by the establishment of their restaurant, Lao Laan-Xang, which means, “Laos, Land of a Million Elephants,” and refers to the strength and prosperity of the old kingdom of Laos.

On the first day of the new year of 1981, Christine vividly remembers the cold two feet of snow in her shorts and t-shirt paired with the warmth of the blanket wrapped around her by her sponsors. Bounyong soon began English Language Training; almost attaining her GED, but had to abandon it in order to support her family. On top of being a single mother, Bounyong also sent money to her family in Laos—working 15 hour days. After ten years of entry-level factory labor, Christine describes her mother’s ambitions to open Lao Laan-Xang as:

“...it was her American Dream to have a business of her own after working so many years for someone else.”

Lao Laan-Xang’s success was not overnight. They faced difficulty acquiring loans, connecting with Lao food suppliers, and making a name for Lao Laan-Xang. Just a freshman at UW-Madison, simultaneously navigating her own world of socio-cultural barriers, Christine was her mother’s business partner and handled all the paperwork. Due to their high-risk status as women-refugee small-business owners, they were unable to receive bank loans and requested microloans from family members for the initial Odana location. In 1997, Christine tried again and applied for a bank loan for the Willy Street location. However, the banker denied her the loan on the basis that she did not have enough equity. Later that day, Christine expressed her frustrations to her insurance agent who told her that he had just gone golfing with the bank president and would give him a call. Upon returning to her office that day, the bank apologized and granted her the loan. In addition to the loans, Bounyong and Christine faced difficulty finding support networks in the Madison area. Today, Bounyong and Christine act as mentors by helping their employees navigate their own paperwork. The business-building of Lao Laan-Xang
reflects the barriers and connections that impede and aid other refugees in establishing small businesses. Bounyong and Christine remark on how their restaurant emphasizes ethnic differences and take pride in introducing Madison to Lao sticky rice. Through the conduit of cuisine, Lao Laan Xang educates its eaters on the traditions, history, and people of Laos.

Dedication to Education

Successful and tired from being a restaurateur, Bounyong wishes to retire in Laos. Where once educational equity was not afforded to her, she plans to build a small school for young girls and orphans in Luang Prabang. After graduating from UW-Madison, Christine has prioritized community development and education of underrepresented communities in her professional path. She emphasizes the power of a meal–bringing families together to share culture and dance. Bounyong and Christine’s dedication to educational opportunities are founded in their own experiences of limited opportunity in Laos and as one of the only Lao students at UW-Madison.

Conclusion

Following a six-month flight from Laos, the Inthachiths have opened two restaurants, sent all of the children to college, built communities of support, and now foster educational equity in the States and back in Laos. Bounyong and Christine’s commitment and conviction towards the Lao culture and educational equity is evidenced in Lao Laan-Xang and their respective work today.