

## CHAPTER 5

# THE HMONG

*Struggle and Perseverance*



Hmong Villages are located throughout China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

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## → THE BEGINNING

Four gods hold up the corners of the world and are responsible for creation. Long ago they sent a flood, and waters covered all the earth. Into a wooden barrel were placed a boy and a girl, who were sent by the Lord of the Sky to populate the earth. When the waters receded, they stepped out of their barrel and saw they were alone in the world. When their baby was born, it looked like an egg, smooth and oval. The boy and girl cut the egg into pieces, and scattered it over the land. Each piece grew into new people, until all the clans of the Hmong were born, and the earth was full of people.

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## → INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Hmong are a tribal people who have traditionally lived in isolated mountain villages throughout China, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Originating in Southern China, the Hmong were historically referred to as Meo or Miao (“primitive” or “barbarian”) by outsiders, a pejorative label which they reject (Ovesen 1995). “Hmong” is their own word, meaning “free people.” Hmong tales tell of an ancestral past in a land of ice and snow, and perpetual darkness, leading some to posit European ancestry, assuming the stories are of Siberia (Fadiman 1997).

The story of the Hmong is a history of struggle, rebellion, and perseverance. Fadiman (1997:13) describes Hmong history as “a marathon series of bloody scimmages, punctuated by occasional periods of peace, though hardly any of plenty.” Chinese literature mentions the Hmong as early as the twenty-seventh century B.C., when they lived along the basins of the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers for several centuries (Geddes 1976). Relations between the Hmong and the Chinese were never friendly. Hmong chose to retain their own way of life, preferring their own food, dress, language, and music over that of the Chinese, who attempted to incorporate (or at least influence) them. Emperors set up singularly punitive rules for the recalcitrant Hmong, who wanted nothing more than to be left alone (Fadiman 1997). Over hundreds of years, the Hmong skirmished with the Chinese, settling and resettling to avoid extermination. In the sixteenth century, the Ming dynasty constructed a wall one hundred miles long and ten feet high in an attempt to contain the Hmong in one area. In the eighteenth century, bloody battles were a regular occurrence. By the mid-nineteenth century, Chinese practices drove many Hmong out of the north from fertile lands to the rugged mountains southward, and from there to mountainous regions across Southeast Asia. Facing massacre and unwilling to give up their way of life, they chose poorer mountainous terrain because its inaccessibility afforded them greater safety (Yang 1993).

In the 1890s the French took control of Indochina, levying oppressive taxes on the population. The Hmong in Laos, no strangers to conflict with oppressive authorities, rebelled. In 1896, they refused to pay what they considered extortion. Armies were sent into the mountains to intimidate the Hmong,

who organized a resistance force, leading to an eventual ceasefire, ordered by French authorities (Yang 1993). A second uprising, far more serious than the first, took place from 1919–1921. It was dubbed “The Madman’s War,” largely because the rebel leader, Pa Chay, was said to climb trees in order to “receive his military orders directly from heaven” (Fadiman 1997:17). Others bristle at this designation, claiming it makes light of a valiant attempt to resist colonial oppression (Yang 1993). The Hmong insurrection was successful enough to lead the French government to grant them special administrative status, which was essentially an official policy granting the Hmong their centuries-old wish: to be left undisturbed in the mountains with no forced participation in any world but their own. Peace prevailed only until the 1940s, when both World War II and the war in Southeast Asia would prove disastrous for the Hmong.

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## ➔ TRADITIONAL HMONG LIFE

### Traditional Economy

The majority of Hmong (roughly six million) still live in Southern China (Koltyk 1998). There are an estimated 350,000 in northern Vietnam, one quarter million in Laos, and 100,000 in northern Thailand (Ovesen 1995).

The Hmong practice slash and burn (swidden) agriculture, as part of their mobile way of life and migratory history. Fields are used until they are infertile, allowed to lie fallow, and then replanted when they have recovered. Land within two hours walk of the village is planted. When this area is no longer usable, villagers move to another mountain and begin again, leaving a landscape dotted with patches of deforestation. The average time one settled area will yield crops is six or seven years, although some fields can be urged into production for as long as fourteen.

A field (*rai*) is selected based on its proximity to the village and its slope, since steep land which has been cleared loses much of its arable soil during monsoon season. Trees are cleared and the remaining brush is burned, with the ashes spread for fertilizer. Unless the plot is very close to the village, farmers construct several small shelters at the edge of each *rai* so they need not travel to and from the village during the peak of the season. In one, the farmer can sleep; in the others, animals can be housed and crops can be stored after harvesting (Yang 1993).

Rice and corn are the most important staple food crops, supplemented by a huge array of vegetables and fruits. Cucumbers, squash, soybeans, and cabbage are the most plentiful. Tropical fruits are cultivated, and the peach, carried to Laos from China over all the years of migration, is especially prized. Nonfood crops are also important, and none more so than the opium poppy.

Opium poppy growing has a long history among the Hmong, playing a central role in their traditional economy for well over one hundred years (Yang 1993). The flower originated in the Middle East, and during the eighteenth century use of the drug derived from its flower spread throughout India, where the

trade was controlled by the East India Company, through which it reached China. Profits there were tremendous, but Chinese authorities were alarmed at the consequences of the drug and mounted a campaign to discourage its use, leading to the Opium War between Britain and China in the mid-nineteenth century. It was at this time that the Hmong, driven out of their homes in southern China by the invaders who seized their land, began to cultivate opium in the limestone-rich mountain soil where it thrived. They soon became experts in the care of this difficult crop, and Hmong in China, Laos, and North Vietnam depended on the income (the majority of which they had no choice but to share with government and military officials) (Yang 1993). Opium was, in fact, their only cash crop, and one which was extraordinarily valuable. As Fadiman (1997:123) notes:

One could hardly invent a more perfect commodity for mountain transport: easily portable, immune to spoilage, and possessing a stratospherically high value-to-weight ratio. One kilogram of opium was worth as much as half a ton of rice.

Lowland merchants (and Europeans) paid for opium with silver bars (or coins, called piasters), which constituted the Hmong definition of wealth. It was melted down for necklaces and used for bride-price. May Ying—Opium Poppy—is considered a name of unparalleled beauty and good fortune to bestow upon a daughter (Fadiman 1997). The Hmong use opium therapeutically, to relieve pain, as well as recreationally, but several studies point to its not being either a social or medical danger when used in traditional, local context (Ovesen 1995, Westermeyer 1968).

Livestock also figure importantly into Hmong traditional economy. Roosters and hens are kept by every family, and their utility goes beyond their value as food. (In fact, eggs are rarely eaten: they are far more valuable for their part in shamanic curing rituals and other ceremonies [Yang 1993]). Poultry is used ritually to retrieve the lost soul of a sick child, to seal a marriage ceremony, and at funerals, to ease the transit of a soul from this world to the next.

Pigs are also owned by every family and are valued for both their flesh and their fat, which is used in cooking. Cattle are used not for agriculture but as objects of sacrifice when asking ancestors for help. Horses are of more help in the fields, carrying baskets of rice and corn to the village from the *rais*.

## The Village

Hmong houses (*tsevs*) vary based on location and climate. In Thailand and Vietnam, where villages are at lower elevations (and are thus warmer), houses are often built on stilts above the damp ground to keep them dryer and breezier (Willcox 1986). Reached by wooden steps or bamboo ladders, raised houses also provide distance from snakes and insects, while adding covered storage space. The *tsev* is framed in bamboo, lashed together and covered with grasses, straw, or woven cut bamboo. Roofs are thatched shingles. Houses in Laos, by contrast, are built directly on the ground, often of wooden planks or split bamboo. The floor is packed earth, and the roof thatched with large leaves. Laotian *tsevs* are



Hmong girl in traditional dress.

constructed with heavy support beams, the most important of which is in the center (Ovesen 1995). It is home to a domestic spirit, which guards the house: it is honored by burying the placenta of a baby boy under the floor near its base (Fadiman 1997).

In the main room of the house is the cooking hearth with altars lining one wall. There is storage space under the eaves, and some *tsevs* house a granary inside. (Others have rice and corn storage in an adjacent building.) Married couples have rooms off the center room; visitors are accommodated by sleeping platforms which jut out from the walls. Mats of rice straw are coiled into seats, and large woven baskets serve as storage. Garden plots outside the houses are fenced off with bamboo sticks to prevent hungry pigs from eating the family's produce.

The arrangement of houses in a village is never random, and often entails divination as well as practical considerations. When planning the construction of a new *tsev*, the first requirements is that it be near the *rais*, a source of water, and the houses of family members. After those features are in place, a ceremony is performed to ascertain the spiritual suitability of the location. One method is to place a small pile of uncooked rice in the proposed location of the central pillar. The rice is covered and left overnight. If it is there in the morning, unmoved, then the spirits have approved the site. Alternatively, a measured stick of wood can be positioned in the central pillar's hole. If it is longer by morning, the house may be built (Ovesen 1995). Construction is done communally, and generally takes three or four men the better part of two weeks.

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## ➔ SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

### Patrilineal Clans

The meaning of individual households and village differs for Hmong, as compared with their countries' other ethnic groups. For most of these, villages provide the most important organizing principle. The holding of ancestral land is what connects individual households and their members. For the Hmong, their migratory lifestyle and clan organization has resulted in a different set of priorities.

Ovesen (1995) describes Hmong villages as having a relative lack of cohesion as compared with those of other groups in Laos, with the focus directed more toward individual households. This is a result of two factors: the mobility demanded by a slash-and-burn economy, and patrilineal clan organization.

Different sources cite different numbers of Hmong clan divisions: some say there are twelve (Willcox 1986), most list either eighteen (Ovesen 1995) or nineteen (Yang 1993). Children are members of their father's clan (*xeem*), and despite the fact that mobility means that clans are very widely dispersed over great distances, exogamy is very strictly practiced. Clan membership takes precedence over regional or village loyalties, and this solidarity is of great importance given Hmong migratory patterns. When the head of a household decides it is time to move on, he will contact clan members in the new village, and obtain advice and sponsorship for the move. When Hmong are traveling through a village, even one in which they know no one, they may locate members of their own *xeem* and be assured of hospitality. (Ovesen [1995] points out that this practice is demonstrated in Hmong who resettle in the United States by the great importance of owning a telephone: listing ones clan name—used as a surname—in the phone book allows visitors to find their *xeem*.)

Patrilineal clans are further divided into lineages (*kwv tij*), and it is these ties which are depended upon for economic help and daily assistance. In some ways, Ovesen (1995) points out, the lineage functions as a large extended family. While in other groups, lineages may be traced back over many generations, Hmong lineages rarely are reckoned beyond three generations, meaning that the common "ancestor" may, in fact, be living in the household. Lineage members are those who help move a household, provide rice or even money during difficult times, or share land. But material assistance is often secondary to the social, emotional, and spiritual value of lineage connections. Hmong say that they are only happy when they are near their family. Ovesen (1995) notes that the spiritual importance of being close to lineage members is literal, and has practical implications: the oldest lineage member possesses crucial knowledge and authority, as well as being in charge of the family's spiritual life. Thus, when he dies, the residence of his successor dictates the new home of the rest of the family who will move to his village in order to be guided by him in their veneration of the spirits.

Each Hmong household is something of a self-contained unit. The oldest married man is generally considered the head and is the owner of all material goods, from livestock and land to the items in the house itself. As the individual responsible for the family's welfare, it is he who decides when the land is exhausted and it is time to move on. Household size varies from a married couple and their young children to units which include married children and widowed elderly family members. All members must be of the same clan, however: *xeem* spirits do not allow members of different clans to reside together.

The fact that individual households are the focus of Hmong social and economic life, and that villages engender no particular attachments, is demonstrated in the fact that the Hmong do not care to name their villages. Their identity centers on clan and lineage membership, and their villages are named

by local Lao authorities. Village organization is also subject to rules set up by district rules, which mandate a village headman be elected by household heads and report in with district authorities. It is his responsibility to settle disputes over land and cattle, and minor domestic squabbles. He has no fixed term of office, remaining in his position as long as everyone is satisfied with his performance and he wishes to do so. Successful headmen rely on elders to advise him on matters ranging from maintaining peaceful interpersonal relations to judging the proper length of time the *rais* must lie fallow before replanting.

## Marriage

Traditional Hmong marriages are arranged by the fathers of the bride and groom, with cross-cousin marriage the preferential form. Girls are generally married in their middle teens, boys from ages eighteen to twenty. Polygyny is permitted, though uncommon. Elopement is a permitted traditional alternative to an arranged match, regarded as performative declaration of the desire to marry. The boy and his friends would hide and “capture” the girl (with her happy participation), whose parents would come to her rescue and receive a silver piaster from the boy. Having thus announced their intentions, the fathers would initiate marital negotiations. There is no stigma attached to premarital sex among teenagers, and often pregnancy was a third route to marriage. Today, boys often send a friend with a silver coin to the girl’s father, as a request for negotiations to begin. Three days after the presentation of the coin, the couple spends a three-day period at the future groom’s house. This begins the girl’s entry into his clan, something to which the ancestral spirits must agree. During this time, ceremonies are performed to ensure the young couple’s souls do not wander off; the girl in particular is at risk for this consequence, since her incorporation into her betrothed’s group is “a spiritually delicate business” (Ovesen 1995).

Once this sojourn at the boy’s house is complete, the families begin to negotiate in earnest, setting a bride price and payment for the celebration. The amount spent on the wedding reflects the wealth of the families and the size of the affair. The bride price is generally fixed, by consultation between village elders and district authorities. Because bride-price reflects a woman’s potential for reproduction and labor, compensation varies. A girl who has never been married demands the highest price. Women who have been widowed after less than six years of marriage demand a higher bride price than those who have been widowed following a marriage of six to ten years. Women who had been married for more than ten years bring no bride price at all. Various fines are levied around issues of pregnancy and refusal to marry (Ovesen 1995).

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## ➔ RELIGION

While between 10 and 20 percent of the Hmong have been converted to Christianity by missionaries, the vast majority are animists, with a complex system of beliefs and practice revolving around the spirit world. Spirits (*dabs*) of various

kinds are involved in every aspect of Hmong life (Nusit 1976, Vang 1984). The shaman (*txiv neeb*) is a crucial mediator between worlds.

## The Spirits

The Hmong strive for equilibrium in all they do. Balance is the key to a fulfilling and valuable life. Harmony within oneself, between friends and family, between clans and lineages, and between humanity and nature is what one must strive for. It is with the spirits, whose presence is interwoven in all activities, that Hmong balance and well-being rests. As such, attention must be paid to their demands and requirements.

All spirits are caught up together in an intricate dance of life and after-life. Ancestral spirits guide living clan members. Animal spirits are often thought of as kindred spirits, who can exchange and share souls with human beings (Conquergood 1989). Every natural feature has an animated spirit, surrounding the Hmong with trees and rivers alive in multiple ways. Conquergood (1989) describes Hmong cosmology by saying:

The Hmong celebrate their humanity, not as a discrete and impenetrable part of the natural order, but as part of the circle of life of all creation—caught up in the rotation of the seasons, and deeply connected with the configuration of the mountains, and the reincarnation of life from generation to generation, even from species to species. Life, in its myriad forms, is intimately articulated through souls and spirits (pp. 45–46).

The most important categories of *dabs* are the household spirits, medicine spirits, nature spirits, and shamanic spirits (Ovesen 1995). The household spirits exert their influence before construction begins. Once their approval is obtained, they occupy several sites within the dwelling: there is a spirit of the house, a spirit of the door, a spirit of the center post, and spirits of the large and small hearth (Geddes 1976). It is the spirit of the house whose approval is sought for construction. Once the house is built, an altar to that spirit is constructed opposite the front door. At the beginning of each new year, a chicken or pig is sacrificed and its blood is applied to the altar constructed out of painted paper (Ovesen 1995). It is this spirit who is responsible for the general health and welfare of all who reside in the home. The ceremony for the spirit of the door is also one which must be performed annually, and always at night. Pork and chicken is cooked and arranged near the door. The head of the household closes the door, saying that it is his intent to feed the door spirit and keep good fortune in and ill fortune out. For the next three days, only residents of the house may enter through the door.

The ceremony for the center post of the house is performed every three years and is essential to secure the souls of the household that might wander, resulting in serious illness. As in the other ceremonies, a pig or chicken is sacrificed. These offerings to the spirits are the main impetus for raising chickens, pigs, and cattle, which are far more important as sacrificial animals than as food or draught animals (Geddes 1976).

Certain magical practitioners (*khawvkoobs*) have the ability to call forth the spirits of medicine to assist in warding off sickness. There is an altar to these spirits in most households, and herbs are required to appease them.

Outside of the household reside the spirits of nature, who prefer to live in out of the way places, sometimes preparing to ambush an unsuspecting soul. While they are not evil spirits, they do not like to be disturbed and may take revenge if they are happened upon. The Hmong's main site of vulnerability is the soul (*plig*), several of which inhabit each body, and all of which have the tendency to wander, causing illness or death. There are certain times of life when one is more vulnerable to soul loss, and special ceremonies are performed to prevent such an event or to call back the wandering soul once it has gone off. Calling back the soul (*tu plig*) is always performed for a newborn three days after birth, which is the time it takes for the body and soul to be bound up together, creating a full person (Ovesen 1995). It is performed for a bride on the third day of her married life to assure that her souls will reside in her new home, that of her husband's clan. Calling back a soul is imperative when a person falls ill, and when both household members and *khawvkoobs* are unsuccessful in this, a shaman must be summoned.

## Shamans

It is in the person of the shaman through which the most deeply held beliefs of the Hmong are manifest. Through his or her healing trances, core tenets of the culture are performed and reinforced. The shamanic spirits, *dab neeb*, select their own representatives among the Hmong; it is not a matter of human choice. Most often, a person will fall ill, beset by fever and hallucinations. An experienced shaman called in to help is able to recognize that it is not merely soul loss which is causing the illness. Rather, the *dab neeb* of a deceased shaman have selected this individual to receive their gifts. After recovery, the chosen person must study with an established healer for several years, learning the identity and habits of the *dabs*, the chants and rituals to capture wandering souls, and perfecting their ability to go into trance and tremble. The shaking of the shaman, in trance, is an essential component of the healing process, and it is a dangerous and exhausting art, which puts the shaman's own soul at risk.

## Language and Arts

For most of their history, Hmong tradition has been an oral tradition. It was not until the 1950s that the language was written, an activity undertaken by Western missionaries in order to promote literacy. There are several Hmong dialects, most of which are mutually intelligible. In Laos, speakers of the two main dialects are referred to as White Hmong and Blue (or sometimes Green) Hmong, a reference to the color of the women's traditional skirts. Most words in the tonal language are monosyllabic.

The fact that Hmong is a tonal language has been linked with the importance of music in everyday traditional life. (Willcox 1986) Improvisational singing and sung poetry set the pace for working in the *rais*, begin ceremonies to honor ancestral spirits, and fill leisure time. Courtship is initiated with music, and at the end of life, the soul is sent to the spirit world with a song.

The most popular musical instruments are flutes made of bamboo reeds. The *qeej*, a mouth organ, is owned by most families, and is often cited as the most beloved emblem of Hmong culture (Willcox 1986, Yang 1993). Its importance may be inferred from the fact that when faced with choosing only a few items to bring to the United States, the majority of refugee families were sure to include a *qeej* to accompany them on the “soul path from Laos, through Thailand, and finally to the United States” (Willcox 1986:31). Two-string violins and various percussive instruments are also important for celebrations and ceremonies. Several drums and rattles are the exclusive purview of shamans, played only during healing rituals or funerals.

Traditional Hmong dress is elaborate and colorful, and Hmong women are renowned textile artists. The traditional process of making clothing begins with cultivation of the plants (hemp and other woody plants). Fibers must then be spun and prepared and dyed, before they can be transformed into the cloth embroidered into breathtaking garments. The most exquisite of these cloth pieces is the *paj ntaub* (“flower cloth”), on which geometric or organic designs are embroidered, appliquéd, or batiked. The stitching is painstaking, with the most prized sewing performed in stitches so tiny they resemble minuscule beads (Fadiman 1997). Dressing for special occasions involves several layers of skirts, vests, fabric belts over twenty feet long, wound around the waist, and triangular cloth leggings. Over these are worn elaborate silver breastplates and a pagoda-shaped hat adorned in bright colors and tinkling coins. The central item is the skirt, which can take even the most skilled woman more than two years to make, but also demands up to three hours of labor simply to put it away after it is worn. The skirts may contain upwards of five hundred tiny pleats. Because it is important that they hold their shape, after wearing, each pleat is stitched in place along its length, with a single thread from waist to hem. In order not to damage the embroidery, the stitching must be very tiny. When the skirt is to be worn, the storage threads are gently eased out of the pleats; they are laboriously stitched back in place to preserve the pleating for the next wearing.

In addition to designs and scenes of nature, Hmong women have often used the skirts to tell stories, preserve traditions, and even communicate with one another. There are folktales about grandmothers finding long-lost grandsons by stitching clan signs onto the skirts and walking through the mountains, and clever women who avoided harm by elaborately embroidering snakes which looked so realistic it protected them from real snakes, who will not attack one another. During the time when Chinese authorities attempted to prevent the Hmong from speaking their own language, women were said to have devised a pictorial code which they appliquéd to the skirts, sending messages to one another and “poking fun at their oppressors” (Willcox 1986:42).

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## ➔ WAR IN INDOCHINA

In the 1940s, the Japanese army attempted to occupy French Indochina. Because the French had paid little attention to the people of Laos except to extract punitive taxes, the Hmong began to organize themselves, and several clans emerged as the most political, competing for local administrative posts which the colonials were willing to let them fill. When the Japanese invaded, some clans aligned themselves with the French colonialists, others with the Japanese troops. The French were loath to lose the revenue they reaped from opium, and officials were sent into the mountains to encourage Hmong loyalty (and to urge the Hmong to increase their opium poppy production) (Chan 1994).

In 1945, just before the Japanese defeat, Laos declared its independence. In 1946, the French retook Laos, and several anti-French movements arose, including the radical Pathet Lao, which became aligned with communist forces in Vietnam. The French were ousted in 1956, and a series of coalition governments ran Laos until the early 1960s, when the war in Vietnam began to take its toll on Laos.

The Hmong figured prominently in this conflict because they were recruited by the CIA to be part of a secret mercenary army, trained by the Green Berets. In 1960 a CIA agent was sent into the Laotian jungle to find Vang Pao, a Hmong military leader who had previously fought against North Vietnamese forces in northern Laos. Vang Pao agreed to help the American forces repel the Communist troops, and set up a meeting with Hmong clan leaders to enlist their support. American officials promised to support the Hmong in defeat or victory, and shipments of guns, ammunition, food, and medical supplies soon began. The Hmong helped to build air bases near their villages, trusting that the American army would keep its end of the bargain.

As the Pathet Lao advanced in Laos, Vang Pao evacuated some hundred thousand Hmong from their villages, resettling them in refugee camps where, unable to rely on their usual mode of subsistence, they became dependent upon CIA supplies in order to survive (Chan 1994). Meanwhile, the Hmong secret army continued to fight for the United States, by 1969 numbering more than forty thousand troops.

Although Laos had been guaranteed neutrality in the 1962 Geneva Protocol, neither the Americans nor the Communists abided by this agreement. Americans secretly began bombing in Laos, eventually dropping over two million tons of bombs on the country in an attempt to stop the Pathet Lao. In the United States, this was referred to as the "Quiet War" (the war in Vietnam being the loud one), but it was hardly so for the Hmong, who endured one bombing raid every eight minutes for nine years (Fadiman 1997). Countless civilians were killed during these sorties, with entire Hmong villages wiped out. Estimates of the price paid by Hmong set the civilian death toll at 50,000 and the CIA-trained Hmong loss of life at 17,000 (Chan 1994). Surviving Hmong suffered as well. Parents, wives, and children of Hmong troops moved through the mountains, attempting to evade Communist forces while planting crops. It

was often impossible to stay in one site long enough to harvest what they had grown, and so they were reduced to eating whatever they might find while fleeing through the jungle—leaves, bark, and when lucky, wild fruit.

In 1973 American military involvement in Southeast Asia ended with the Paris Peace Accords. Top-ranking Hmong officers were offered asylum in the United States, but the vast majority of the Hmong people were abandoned. Laos fell to the Pathet Lao, and Vang Pao asked the CIA to evacuate the rest of the Hmong, as promised, because they were seen by the new Laotian government as traitors and would surely be victims of reprisals. He was told that this was impossible; of the ten thousand Hmong who arrived at the Long Chen airbase hoping for help, only several hundred were evacuated. Confused and “stunned by the failure of the Americans to keep their promise” (Chan 1994:45) to provide aid and protection in return for their fighting, those left behind felt they had only two options: to flee into the jungles and attempt to hide from government threatened “torment and death” (Trueba 1990: xxiii) or to attempt to leave the country, on foot.

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## ➔ REFUGEES AND RESETTLEMENT

The Pathet Lao took over, and Hmong life was again altered beyond recognition. Those Hmong who were identified as having fought for the United States were captured and sent to “reeducation camps” where the majority died of malnutrition or cruelly hard labor (Chan 1994). Villagers found their world turned upside down by the new government regulations. Communism mandated that all farms be collective; thus, family land was consolidated and the yield was distributed by the state. Traditional slash-and-burn agriculture was outlawed, and anyone found practicing it was arrested (Fadiman 1997). Village leaders were displaced by government appointees. Clan membership, family structure, traditional social and economic relationships were all disrupted. Many Hmong were resettled in lowland areas to work on communist collectivities, and exposed to tropical diseases to which they had no immunities. Previously unencountered malaria—carried by mosquitoes which cannot live in the high altitudes of Hmong mountain villages—took a great toll.

The Pathet Lao troops that patrolled the villages brooked no disobedience. Hmong who seemed rebellious or slow to follow rules were told they needed to attend a “seminar” to learn the new ways. Those dissenters removed from the village by Pathet Lao patrols were sent to seminar camps, and rarely returned. Hones (1999:70) reports being told “if you made a big mistake you’d go to a seminar and never come back.” In response, some fled to higher, more inaccessible mountains in an attempt to hide from the troops.

Hundreds of thousands of Hmong chose a different path. Beginning in the spring of 1975, Hmong who expected reprisal, were starving, and filled with terror, set out for Thailand, most on foot. Some traveled in large groups, others as small families. The trip took most travelers a month or two, but there were many whose journey to the border took them years. They inched along,

traveling only at night, attempting to avoid both capture and the land mines underfoot. Babies, the elderly, and those who fell ill were carried on the backs of those who were still able to manage. Silence was imperative for survival. Fadiman (1997) was told by one refugee that her son, one month old when the family left their village, knew not a single word when they finally reached Thailand two years later, because no one had dared to talk beyond an occasional whispered direction. To prevent a baby's cry, which could alert the Pathet Lao patrols, mothers would often mix opium in water to assure a child would sleep. If the mixture was too strong, it was fatal. Such babies had to be left, without burial. Frail elders, the sick, and wounded also had to be abandoned, sometimes left with a little food or opium to ease their passing. These were excruciating sacrifices to a people who hold elders in reverence, and who believe that without a proper funeral and burial, a person's soul will wander in eternal distress. Roots and insects were often the best food available. Fadiman (1997:162) was told that when "desperate to fill their stomachs, some people chopped up their sweat-soaked clothes, mixed them with water and salt, and ate them."

The destination of this arduous trek was the Mekong River, which marks the border between Laos and Thailand. It was heavily guarded by government troops, and once there, many who had managed to survive their journey were captured. Those who arrived during monsoon season were swept away in the rushing waters as they attempted to cross, in the dark, with their few possessions—and family members—on their backs. Most mountain-dwelling Hmong could not swim. Some were able to cross in boats; others fashioned make-shift rafts out of what little bamboo was left by the riverside. Some brought empty plastic jugs to use as flotation devices; still others attempted to float by blowing up plastic grocery bags. Stories of crossing the Mekong are told and retold by those who survived the passage. Women embroidered scenes of the exodus in the panels of story cloths (*pandau*). (Hones 1999) Nightmares of the crossing haunted refugees for decades (Fadiman 1997).

Some estimates place at half the number of Hmong who survived their attempt to escape Laos; others set the number lower than that. En route they encountered Pathet Lao and Vietnamese snipers, cluster bombs and land mines, "disease, starvation, exposure, snakebite, tiger maulings, poisoning by toxic plants, and drowning" (Fadiman 1997:165).

By the late 1970s there were more than twenty refugee camps on the Thai border, housing refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. The largest of these was Ban Vinai, which at its fullest, held nearly 43,000, 90 percent of whom were Hmong. It became the largest Hmong settlement in the world, and its area was less than one square mile. Conditions at the camp were squalid; there was no electricity, no running water, no sewage system—and nothing to do. One former occupant explained:

In Ban Vinai, you don't have the right to do anything except get a ration of rice and beans, and go to your tent, and you do that for five or ten years. People were born and grew up there. . . . The elderly person just sleep day

and night, they just wait and see and wait and eat and wait and die and wait and die (Fadiman 1997:166).

The Thai government was unwilling to absorb refugees into the local population. They wanted to repatriate the Hmong or have them resettled in another country. Hmong were terrified to return to Laos, but they also became terrified of the prospect of resettlement in the United States. The majority of Hmong who left Ban Vinai for other countries emigrated to America, both because of their previous association with the U.S. military, and because General Vang Pao had settled in Montana (Fadiman 1997). Those still in Ban Vinai received horrifying letters from relatives in the United States describing urban violence, crumbling tenements, unemployment, and racial prejudice. Daily life in the inner cities—the most common resettlement sites—seemed a nightmare. Despite the egregious conditions at Ban Vinai, many Hmong began to see permanent residence there as preferable to the dangers that would await them back in Laos or in the United States. This was especially true because however crowded and filthy the camp was, unlike the alternatives, it was a place in which Hmong culture was alive and celebrated. Women produced traditional embroidery, families were able to raise vegetables and small livestock, and the sounds of the *qeej* and the chanting of shamans were everywhere (Conquergood 1989, Fadiman 1997). Older Hmong were especially unwilling to leave. Fadiman (1997) cites a Hmong refugee who left Ban Vinai for California as explaining:

At the camp, the cultural tradition was still there. There was patrilineage. Children still listened to Grandpa. What is the good to come to America if all that change? And a lot of elderly people, though they never, never say it openly to strangers, what really haunt them is they are afraid in America they will not have a good funeral ceremony and a good grave, and that is more important than any other thing in the world (p. 168).

Thailand declared Ban Vinai closed in 1992, and told the 11,500 Hmong who remained that they must choose between returning to Laos and resettling in another country. In preparation, many were periodically moved to other locations. According to Hones (1999:76), “these periodic shifts from camp to camp effectively terrorized the refugees because they could never be certain when they would be uprooted again or, worse yet, sent across the border” and back to Laos. About seven thousand did choose to return, although they were restricted to the lowlands, not permitted access to their home villages, and still prohibited from practicing slash-and-burn agriculture. They were promised that at the very least they would be safe, and there would be no more collective farms and no more “seminars.” However, Fadiman (1997:169) reports that although it has been denied by the Thai and Laotian governments (as well as U.S. sources), “some Hmong have been forced to return to Laos against their will, and, once there, have been persecuted or killed.” As it turned out, more than 10,000 Hmong, most from Ban Vinai, fled the camps and neither returned to Laos nor chose to leave Thailand. Rather, they fled to an area north of Bangkok, on the land of a Buddhist monastery (Fadiman 1997).

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## ➔ HMONG IN THE UNITED STATES

The experience of Hmong resettlement in the United States is unlike that of so many other groups who make up the fabric of the American population. Fadiman (1997) recounts one example of the “Americanization” of European immigrants, who worked at a Ford automotive plant in Dearborn, Michigan, in the early 1920s, and who were given compulsory classes in becoming American, which consisted of instruction in table manners, hygiene, and work habits. (She reports that the first English sentence they were expected to memorize was “I am a good American.”):

During their graduation ceremony they gathered next to a gigantic wooden pot, which their teachers stirred with ten-foot ladles. The students walked through a door into the pot, wearing traditional costumes from their countries of origin and singing songs in their native languages. A few minutes later, a door in the pot opened, and the students walked out again, wearing suits and ties, waving American flags, and singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” (p. 182–183).

The Hmong who fled Laos and Thailand were not searching for a new nationality. Their intent was not to climb into a giant melting pot and emerge transformed. Quite the reverse: their resolve was the same resolve they maintained in the face of Chinese attempts to force assimilation in the nineteenth century. They wanted nothing more than to resist attempts to change them; they wanted to remain Hmong. If they could have done so in Laos, they would surely have stayed in their own land. Fadiman (1997:183) quotes anthropologist Jacques Lemoine as observing that the Hmong “did not come to our countries only to save their lives, they rather came to save their selves, that is, their Hmong ethnicity.” Because that is true, the Hmong faced great difficulties in their interactions with officials charged with their resettlement, as well as citizens of many of the places in which they were placed.

To avoid “burdening” communities with too many refugees, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) peppered Hmong throughout the United States, rather than clustering families and clans together. This was extremely difficult for people who were unfamiliar with their new surroundings and who depended greatly on the support of their friends and especially their relatives. When clan members were kept together, they were placed as a group with no other clans in the area, rendering it nearly impossible to find marriage partners within the rubric of exogamy. Nearly all of the locations chosen for the resettlement of these people whose roots were in the mountains and who had never experienced cold weather were in flat lands with bitterly frigid winters. Chicago, Minneapolis, Detroit, and Milwaukee were chief among them, since INS refugee services were more available in these large cities. In addition to urban areas, some individual nuclear families were sent to isolated rural enclaves, which often proved disastrous. With no other Hmong to help them navigate the complex and strange new culture they encountered, there was an alarming incidence of depression, anxiety, and suicide (Fadiman 1997).

General Vang Pao had advised the American government that all they need do to ensure successful resettlement, was to allow the Hmong to be together in traditionally sized groups, on a small amount of land—even inferior land—on which they could raise vegetables and chicken. Most Hmong brought only the few precious things they could carry, and many included a hoe. This suggestion ran counter to the goal of assimilation, and was never considered. In retrospect, officials in charge of coordinating the “catastrophically mishandled” (Fadiman 1997:186) resettlement effort conceded that it had been a disaster, handled “shoddily.” One said frankly “It was a kind of hell they landed into. Really, it couldn’t have been done much worse” (Fadiman 1997:186).

The overwhelming task of deciphering life in America led one Hmong man to a poignant observation: “In America, we are blind because even though we have eyes, we cannot see. We are deaf because even though we have ears, we cannot hear” (Fadiman 1997:187). In Philadelphia, Chicago, and other cities, Hmong were routinely victims of theft, assault, and racial violence. For some, the solution was what had often been so in the past: moving on. In keeping with the proverb “there is always another mountain,” large numbers of Hmong who were without traditional group supports in colder climes migrated to California. Of the 100,000 Hmong reported to be in the United States by the 1990 census, more than 40,000 have settled in California; Minnesota and Wisconsin each have 16,000 Hmong residents (Chan 1994).

In their so-called “secondary migrations” to warmer areas, Hmong families were financed by clan members in the United States. The original resettlement, however, had been contracted out by the federal government to private nonprofit groups, which then found local sponsors. Most of these voluntary resettlement agencies had religious affiliations, and the majority of Hmong found themselves being actively proselytized by church groups and pastors, who visited them at home and attempted to explain that an integral part of their new lives should be the embrace of Christianity. This has had serious consequences for both the Hmong, who have been converted and those who have not. The mere fact that within families there is this divide has led to a breakdown of support. Christianity cannot support many of the most central tenets of Hmong culture, chief among them animism, animal sacrifice, and shamanism. Those who have become Christians refuse to participate in important family ceremonies (the soul calling of a newborn, for example) because of the traditional elements involved. Older Hmong whose children or grandchildren have converted fear that they will not have a traditional funeral, which will result in their souls never finding rest (Ovesen 1995). Within the converted community, clan and lineage solidarity is undermined by the message that the ideal is to consider all people to be your “brothers” and treated as such (Ovesen 1995).

Chan (1994) reports that Hmong elderly in particular have suffered, especially from the social marginalization of old people in American culture. Their status as revered providers of sage advice, respected and consulted on all matters,

centrally involved in settling disputes and making decisions seems lost to them. He observes:

Unable to speak English, dependent on others to drive them places, fearful of taking public transportation in case they get lost, victimized by crime in the low-income neighborhoods where many of them live, many older Hmong may sit at home with nothing to do except watch television (p. 57).

Marginalized and despondent, they say “We have become children in this country” and ask “Where is my dignity if I cannot do anything for myself?” (Chan 1994:57.)

Secondary migration has many motivations beyond relocating to warmer climates. Seeking employment, education, job training programs, or a less hostile environment all figure prominently in families’ choice to move on. None of these is as important, however, as migrating to find relatives. In Laos, the extended family household lives under one roof, or in homes that are clustered together. In the United States, this family grouping (*tsev neeg*) is more scattered, with separate homes maintained, sometimes even miles apart, but functioning as a unit. Moving to facilitate this web of extended family is of crucial importance. Koltyk (1998), writing about the Hmong community in Wisconsin, reports that individual families from Kansas, Iowa, Colorado, Texas, Minnesota, and California all decided to come together in Wisconsin, to establish a series of homes near one another. Although separate houses, they are thought of as a collective *home*, such that children become accustomed to all of them, sleeping, playing, and eating in multiple residences, being cared for by many adults. Daily life centers around the activities of the sublineage. Women shop and cook together, work in one another’s gardens, prepare communally for rituals and holidays, and provide childcare. Although men have dealings with Hmong men of other clans living locally, they spend most of their time with their brothers and their father’s brothers’ children. When asked to name their friends, Hmong cite their relatives, often to the exclusion of other Hmong who lived in neighboring apartments but who were not family. Koltyk (1998) was surprised to find that while unrelated Hmong do socialize for holidays or ritual events which involve the wider community, their overriding preference for depending only upon kin was paramount: when a young mother’s baby became desperately ill and needed hospitalization, she and her husband spent several hours attempting to locate a family member to care for their other children, despite the fact that their next door neighbor was a Hmong woman with whom they attended English classes. Mutual aid organizations have been established in nearly every Hmong community, and they do provide a sense of larger community, organizing athletic leagues and providing counseling, housing information, language classes, and youth programs. While these services are used, and the language and culture classes are popular, they rarely result in extra-familial friendships outside of the classroom.

Hmong in most communities organize similarly. For example, households will almost always have freezers, but rarely washers and dryers (Koltyk 1998).

A freezer, the first major appliance saved for, has come to represent a household's ability to provide for the extended kin group. It is stocked with enough food to share at a moment's notice, serving as a resource to other households in the network, and to allow many members to come together in one place and prepare a large meal. Televisions, videocassette recorders, and videocameras are also popular, both as ways to learn about American culture, but also to view videos in the Hmong language and to record and exchange family events and rituals with lineage members at a distance. Laundromats are a popular place to socialize, and allow women to get out of the house and meet others, while still performing their domestic duties. Many laundromats with mostly Hmong clientele in California have installed VCRs, encouraging groups to watch Hmong videos together while doing their laundry (Koltyk 1998).

Health and illness are major concerns in the Hmong community, and shamans are kept busy caring for their clan members. Bowing to work and school schedules, healing ceremonies tend to be held on the weekends. Extended family members pool their resources to purchase the necessary ritual items, and convene at one home for what is usually an all-day ceremony. When a death occurs, however, a wider net is cast. The news spreads rapidly across the country and abroad, with relatives often traveling great distances to attend the funeral. Performing the requisite funeral rituals is of crucial importance, outpacing most other traditional ceremonies. The soul's passage to the afterworld is a dangerous journey, and must be carefully guided. Accomplishing this in the United States is difficult, because at every step of the ritual process, Hmong face conflict with the law. Upon death, Hmong tradition mandates washing and preparing the corpse at home, which by law must instead be performed at a funeral parlor. Drums, *qeej* playing and chants, which are performed for long hours around the body, to guide the soul on its way, must be tailored both to funeral home visitation hours and noise regulations. Just as Laotian houses are built only on a site which has been divined to be auspicious, so too must a burial place be assessed, which is often a problem for cemeteries. Perhaps the most onerous responsibility for family members, however—and the one which has the potential to cause most trouble—is animal sacrifice, which is imperative. Several cows must be sacrificed, with the meat then used as the meal for mourners. The honor bestowed by performing this ritual obligation is sometimes the greatest consolation a dying person can receive; when death is imminent, family members will inform the ill individual of the number of cows they are planning to purchase, representing their great importance to the family (Koltyk 1998).

Hmong children in the United States are often described as caught between two cultures, expected to act as interpreters of customs they are learning in school, and of a language their parents and grandparents may not know (Treuba 1990). The exclusive focus on socializing with family can lead to difficulties making friends in school. Yet they are also seen as the hope for the future, with higher education the key (Koltyk 1998). More and more, Hmong parents encourage their children to aim for college and beyond. It is clear, however, that this goal is framed neither as a way to become more American, nor

as a route to individual success, but rather as a way to achieve economic security that will benefit the entire kin network. This leads to a dilemma: parents fear that their childrens' education will result in a loss of ethnic identity, and that rather than its being a vehicle to allow greater Hmong self-sufficiency and independence, it will instead lead them to reject the traditional way of life (Trueba 1990). In fact, while childrens' economic and professional successes are appreciated, "any earmarks of assimilation [are seen] as an insult and a threat" (Fadiman 1997:207). And, inevitably, children do reflect their American surroundings. Fadiman (1997:207) recalls a teenager explaining, "I know how to do *paj ntaub*, but I hate sewing. My mom says, why aren't you doing *paj ntaub*? I say, Mom, this is America."

Fadiman (1997:199) reports that the Hmong are often referred to as America's "least successful refugee," owing to the fact that rates of unemployment are high. She points out, however, that it is only by an economic yardstick that they are thus measured. By other indices—rates of child abuse, crime, domestic violence, responsibility for elderly family members—they can only be admired. That the Hmong community has held on so tenaciously to their ethnic identity runs counter to the American ideal of assimilation, and is likely also used as a measure of "failure." Fadiman (1997:208) cites anthropologist George Scott as observing that in the face of the hardships they have found in the United States, Hmong have responded "by becoming *more* Hmong, rather than less so."

Balance and equilibrium are the key to a healthy Hmong life. Parents hope that by encouraging their children to pursue higher education, they will be creating strong new leaders to maintain Hmong collective identity in future generations (Koltyk 1998). Conquergood (1989:76) believes that "the capacity to hold different ways of knowing in productive tension is both possible and desirable." Perhaps the Hmong in the United States will prove him correct.

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### ➔ FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

History has shown both the empowerment and the violence which can ensue from ethnic pride and discrimination. As you have read, the story of the Hmong is a history of struggle, rebellion, and perseverance. Over hundreds of years, Hmong suffered persecution at the hands of many groups, while fiercely defending their ethnic heritage. Despite the ravages of war and resettlement, they continue to strive to maintain their traditions.