



# VOICES

## of Hmong American Students on Their Diaspora

### PAO LOR

#### Introduction

Hmong Americans are originally a preliterate, seminomadic, and agrarian ethnic hill tribe from Southeast Asia and have now been in the United States for the last four decades. From the 1960s to the mid-1970s, the Hmong joined forces with the U.S. during the Secret War in Laos. After the U.S. pulled out of Laos in 1975, the new Laotian regime began persecuting the Hmong for having supported the Americans. From 1975 to 2014, the American government cooperated in relocating several waves of Hmong refugees to the U.S.

The Hmong American diaspora can be categorized into three distinctive life stages: life in Laos, life in Thailand, and life in the U.S. These three life stages entail the transition and transformation of an ancient and agrarian way of life to a modernized one. Research and books by Hendricks, Downing, and Deinard (1986), D. Yang (1993), Long (1993), Kolytk (1997), Hamilton-Merritt (1999), K. K. Yang (2008), Lor (2009), Vang (2010), Fadiman (2012), and Hillmer (2015) have captured some of the dynamics of the essence of the Hmong American diaspora.

More important, it is best captured by traditional chanting, storytelling, rituals

and ceremonies, day-to-day life activities, progress and prosperity, cultural challenges, social media, and the many anecdotal life stories that are shared throughout the global Hmong communities.

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were at that time 260,073 Hmong residing in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (Hoeffel, Rastogi, Kim, & Shahid, 2012). Of the 260,073 Hmong, Hmong American students, ages 5–24 years, make up 49.4% (Pfeifer, Sullivan, Yang, & Yang, 2012).

In the mid-1980s, researchers began to examine Hmong American students' experiences. The most studied area was their education. In 1985, Goldstein examined the cultural challenges that Hmong boys and girls endured as they transitioned to American high schools. In 1997, Hutchison used several categories of academic data and interviews and reports on Hmong students' academic performance in the preK–12 educational system in Wisconsin, asserting that for most Hmong students, their academic performance was on par with that of their peers.

Vang (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005) has provided critical insights into the cultural and academic experiences of Hmong students in California's preK–11 educational system, reporting that cultural factors continue to affect Hmong students' achievement. In 2003 and 2013, Hmong National Development generated two reports that provided an historical context for the Hmong American educational experience and the status of Hmong

American educational attainment. The reports revealed that Hmong American educational attainment was lagging behind that of other groups in the U.S.

Other areas of research on the Hmong American students' experiences include their perceptions about their family environment (Dung, Deenanath, & Xiong, 2012), Hmong student clubs or associations affecting their cultural and political identities (Ngo, 2015), nutrition and health (Voorhees, Goto, Bianco-Simeral, & Wolff, 2011; Voorhees, Goto, & Wolff, 2014), cultural assimilation (Lee, 2002), intergenerational family conflict (Su, Lee, & Vang, 2005), social well-being (Lee, 2007), and language and cultural identity (Bosher, 1997).

More recently, researchers have started to study Hmong American students' educational experiences in higher education. In particular, researchers have examined variables or factors that influence Hmong American students' college matriculation, retention, and graduation. Some of the variables or factors studied have included life experiences (Lor, 2008; Saloka, 2014; Thao, 2015), institutional policies and culture (DePouw, 2003, 2006, 2012), gender (Lee, 1997; Lor, 2013; Vue, 2008), and other challenges (Ngo, 2000; Xiong, 2012; Xiong & Lam, 2013).

Often missing from the existing research are the "voices" of Hmong American students; more specifically, how do they come to understand, interpret, and make meaning of their Hmong American diaspora? It is this question that gave impetus to this study.

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In this study, I analyzed 31 autobiographies written in the 1990s by Hmong American middle and high school students to get a better understanding of how they had come to understand, interpret, and make meaning of their diaspora, and in particular, their families' journey, their lives and education, and their future hopes and dreams (Northern Lake Winnebago Private Industry Council Inc., 1999).

### Methodology

The study is descriptive and exploratory. It is descriptive in that I described and analyzed a collection of student autobiographies. It is exploratory in that I hope my analysis of the autobiographies provides a good starting point for further studies on the life of Hmong American middle and high school students and also that the analysis might lead to new discoveries about and connections among the different variables that affect Hmong American middle and high school students' life experiences.

The study was guided by the following questions:

How have Hmong American middle and high school students come to understand, interpret, and make meaning of their diaspora?

How have their families and lives changed because of the diaspora?

What are their experiences navigating three vastly different cultures: life in Laos, life in Thailand, and life in the U.S.?

How do they view their educational experiences?

What are their hopes and dreams for their future? How will they go about achieving these hopes and dreams? What challenges, if any, do they foresee in such life pursuits?

Where are some of these Hmong students today?

### Sampling

The sampling was purposeful. It included 31 autobiographies in which participants shared their perspectives on how they had come to understand, interpret, and make meaning of the Hmong American diaspora. They wrote the autobiographies as a part of their involvement in the Summer Youth Education and Employment Program (SYEP) that was sponsored by the Appleton, Wisconsin, YMCA. Twenty of the autobiographies were written by men, and 11 were written by women. Eighteen of the participants were born in Laos; 10 were born in

Thailand; and three were born in the U.S. One participant was married and had two children. For those participants who were born in Laos and Thailand, the number of years they had been in the United States ranged from two to more than 10.

### Data

The data analyzed included experiences the participants shared in their autobiographies. Each autobiography contained all or some aspects of the writer's (a) family dynamics and circumstances, (b) life in Laos, (c) escape to Thailand, (d) refugee camp life, (e) journey to the U.S., (f) religious and cultural influences, (g) variations in educational experiences, and (h) future goals in life.

Some autobiographies were thorough and detailed, whereas some were at times terse, fragmented, and lacking in context.

### Analysis of Data

I used the following steps in my analysis of the 31 autobiographies. First, before thoroughly reading each autobiography, I skimmed through each and took notes on gender and on where the writer was born (Laos, Thailand, or the U.S.).

Next, I carefully read each autobiography several times and took notes with the goal of recognizing some common themes among the 31 autobiographies. After the initial reading and note taking, and after I had reached saturation by sifting and winnowing, I settled on the following common themes among the 31 autobiographies:

- Profile of participants' families,
- Life in Laos,
- Escape to Thailand,
- Refugee camp life,
- Coming to the United States,
- Life in the United States, and
- Future: hopes and dreams.

Because I knew some of the participants personally and was aware of some of their past and present circumstances, I added one more theme:

- Updates on several of the participants.

Guided by the established themes, I read each autobiography several more times, repeatedly flushing out relevant information and aggregating it into the appropriate theme.

Finally, for each theme, I provided a summary and used passages or quotes from the autobiographies to support it

### Limitations

The study had limitations. The study focused on the 31 autobiographies. Voices from other Hmong American middle and high school students, even from the 1990s, might yield different results. My analysis of the data was limited by what the participants had shared in their autobiographies.

Additionally, the themes I generated and the depth of my analysis were limited by my understanding and interpretations of the autobiographies; other researchers might arrive at different themes and interpretations.

### Findings

I broke down my analysis into the eight themes. For each theme, except for updates on several of the participants, I shared key findings and used passages and quotes from the autobiographies to capture their essence.

#### Profile of Participants' Families

In generating a profile of the participants' families, I looked at three key areas: (a) their family compositions, (b) their families' cultural and religious practices, and (c) the transformation of their families from 1975 to the mid-1990s.

#### Family Compositions

The compositions of the 31 participants' families were diverse, representative of the many types of families in the Hmong community. Most participants' families had two parents and siblings of four or more, along with grandparents at times. Other participants, at different stages in their lives, grew up with families with one parent (father or mother) that were polygamous or were absent of parents.

One participant shared his conundrum of growing up with his father:

I was born on June 15, 1979 in Laos in the small village called Noom Kuas. My parents raised me there six months, and then we moved to a small village called Naj Saim where we could grow vegetables, fruits, and farm. We lived there for five years and we had a good life there. A year after that my parent got a divorce because of my dad. He was so sick and my mom did not want to live with him. Even when my Mom and Dad got a divorce, I still loved them very much. My mom always came to feed me because my dad did not know how to feed me. I was so sad that my parents got divorced, but there was nothing I could do to help them because I was only a baby. If [I knew] I was [going] to grow up like this, I would never let them get a divorce. I would tell them how much I loved them, and I needed both of them.

The following participant grew up with her mother and pointed out their family situation after her father had died:

After my father passed away, my family struggled daily to survive. We didn't have anyone to look after us, lead and guide us, and direct my family. Besides, we didn't have any money to buy food or other things that my family needed. We were too young to be able to help my mother. . . . To survive in a third world country, like Laos, without a father figure was worse than hell. Life for my family was like playing a football game without the quarterback.

Years later, her mother remarried. Her remarriage once again changed the family's living situation. Her siblings and she were separated to live with different clan members. Her mother was a widow and remarrying was typical in the Hmong communities back then but is less common today.

A couple of participants had fathers who had multiple wives. At times, the polygamy affected some of families' decisions and circumstances. One participant explained their situation while they were still living in a refugee camp in Thailand:

In 1987 my dad had two wives. In 1988 my family wanted to go Australia, but my dad had two wives so we didn't have a chance go to Australia. We just lived in Thailand.

Another participant provided another polygamous example:

Ai is my brother too, but he has a different mother because my father married two wives. His mother passed away when he was still little.

For some of the participants, the makeup of their families also included grandparents. One participant gave this fond memory of his grandfather:

When I was one year old, my dad got me a dog. The dog was twice my size and twice my weight. He was a reddish-brown dog. When the dog got hungry, my grandfather and I usually fed the dog. When I was two years old, my families move to Paws Luam. In Paws Luam, I love to go out into the woods to gather firewood. Some days my grandfather took me out into the fields to gather sugar cane, corn, pumpkin and wheat.

For another participant, how he came to learn of his grandfather was rather tragic (this was the participant's family's experience crossing the Mekong River):

My dad had to disband his AK-47 for fear of Thai officials. Now all that they had was the clothes on their backs. My grandpa was in serious condition, and he died on

the shores. My family had a little ceremony for him, and then they made their way to the camp of Ban Vinai.

One participant pondered the effects of growing up without her parents:

By being a child without the guidance of parents, I always wonder, "What is life? Can life be fair for me as for everyone else? Is there a solution somewhere that I will be able to see?" I miss my parents very much, especially my mother and my other brother and sister, who still live in Laos today. I wish I could see them again someday and live together once more.

#### Cultural/Religious Practices of Participants' Families

For many participants' families, their ancestral cultural and religious practices (shamanism/animism) continued to play critical roles in defining their daily lives. A few participants' families practiced Christianity.

These two participants illuminated the impact that these cultural/religious practices had on them:

My name is Da Neng Chang, I was born in Thailand. My real name that my parents call me is Cha, but in school my friends call me Da Neng. I don't care what they call me as long as they call me either one. After I was infected by a disease, I also got very sick and my father did all he could but still got sick. Then my grandpa said to try to get me a new name, they did gave me a new name call Cha. From that time on I didn't get sick anymore and they also called me the new name from that time on.

When I was about one year old, I was very sick. My grandpa gave me medicine to make me well but it did not work. I was sick for a year. One day he decided to give me a new name. After he name me Pao Ye then I feel better each day. My grandpa saved my life.

Another participant was more specific about the ceremony performed to change her name:

After living in that village for a couple of months I got very sick, I cried a lot and I went to the bathroom a lot. My father asked a shaman over to see what was wrong with me. The shaman said, "Your daughter is depressed. You must know what you did wrong." My dad then told the story to the shaman that when my mom had me in her stomach my dad had an affair with another woman. My dad threatened my mom that he was going to kill her so I wouldn't be alive. I don't think he really meant that, but that's what he said. Everyday when my dad told my mom to go to the garden my mom always refused and stayed home. The shaman told

my dad to get on his knees and ask to be forgiven. "That is not enough!" the shaman said. He told my dad to let somebody adopt me. My father agreed. Then this Thao family adopted me and they called Mai Thao Xiong. They made me their godchild and they became my godparents. They are still alive and living in California.

Another common ceremony a participant alluded to was *hus plig* or soul calling ceremony:

When my sister and I came back home my father and my three sisters were very mad because they couldn't find us. My mother asked why do you and your sister Ka look all wet and so dirty. Then my sister said when the rain came, dad said I had to take Ka home but when Ka and I went home we came to the bridge we just fell in the river. Then my father and mother went to ask my grandpa to come to the river where my sister and I fell. They went to Hu Plig (a ceremony to get rid of bad luck) at the river, and my grandpa took a duck, cup of rice (*ib tug xyab*) and (*ib rab kuam neeb*) and went to the river.

Two significant ceremonies missing from the autobiographies were the "baci" ceremony (*khis tes*) or shamanistic ritual that is usually conducted to bless a family as they are about to embark on their journey to the U.S.

At the other end of the continuum of the participants' cultural/religious practices was Christianity. Several participants mentioned various church-related activities. These two participants specifically conveyed the powerful influence that Christianity had on them:

In Michigan we found a home near by my sister and her husband and we lived there. We started going to church. My whole family got baptized as Christians in the church called "Our Savior." I don't know what cause me to do the things I did but I stood up and walked to the front of the chapel and asked God to forgive me for all the bad things I have done, and to come and be my Shepard and lead me to the good path. When I said those few words, it seem as though my whole body had been clean away and I had a new beginning. Now I have become active in my church youth group, have found the true meaning of a family and have become a child of Jesus, Christ.

The greatest thing that has changed my life forever is when I came back to Jesus Christ and God. For all long time I have been like a lost sheep wandering through the fields without a Shepard to guide me in the right path. I have always knew that Jesus was there for me if I wanted him in my life, but somehow I just never had time for him. I was always running around

acting hard and tough that no one could hurt me. I did not care about anything, or anyone especially my family which have supported and tried so hard to raise me up right. I can still remember the day when I ask God and Jesus to come back into my life and be my Shepard and guide me to the right path.

### Transformation of Participants' Families

From 1975 to the mid-1990s, the transformation of many participants' families was extreme because of their diaspora, having gone from an agrarian and preliterate way of living in the highlands of Laos to trying to reestablish a new life in a modernized world. The participants understood that the transformation was out of necessity. Their families were being persecuted by the new Laotian government after the Secret War. They had to endure the harsh refugee camp conditions with limited options (stay in Thailand, return to Laos, or go to the U.S.). Their families had to make the difficult but necessary decision to come to the U.S. and then their families had to adapt to a new world with which they were not familiar.

Through the two disparaging decades of diaspora, one key positive factor was that many participants' parents, siblings, and extended family members managed to stay intact as a family. If there were any separations of family members, they were due to normal life patterns, including older siblings getting married and moving out, tragedies, or other extreme circumstances.

The participants realized that a life in America offered their families new opportunities for a better life, but they were not oblivious to the reality that the opportunities came with new challenges: learning English, assimilating into America, getting an education, and getting a job, among others. They also realized that whoever could successfully navigate this uncharted territory would have a greater chance at a better future.

This participant pointed out some of these new challenges:

We landed in Chicago about three or four days later. My parents and other Hmong discovered that life in the U.S. was not as easy as they had thought. There wasn't anyone to take care of us. To go to hospital or stores took about a quarter of a mile to walk. The distance was not a problem, but the snow was. The snow was a couple of feet high and we did not have any boots.

Another participant painted their family's early challenges and then shared how they navigated them;

Also there [after relocating to another

state], my parents tried to find a job but couldn't find any jobs so they decided to move back and live with my cousins [back in Appleton where they lived before]. My uncle [in another state] tried to stop them but couldn't so he told my parents to visit them but we haven't visited them in fourteen years. We are planning to visit them in two years. I don't want to visit them since they made fun of me they said that I had small ears and that I was ugly, so that why I don't want to visit my uncle. When we moved backed to Appleton, we got back on welfare and my dad went to Fox Valley Technical College to study printing. After two years, he finished and got a job at Bower Printing. And my mom, she worked at Valley Packing.

This participant's family tenacity elucidates the resiliency shown by all of the participants and their families.

### Life in Laos

Several factors affected the participants' knowledge and understanding of their families' lives in Laos: how long they lived in Laos, the memories they still had of their lives there, how old they were when they left Laos, what they had come to learn from family members about life in Laos, or a combination of these.

Several themes of their lives in Laos emerged out of these factors: an agrarian lifestyle, moving from tribal village to tribal village, playing with friends and cousins, changing family dynamics, lacking and diminishing resources, going to school, parents and families facing ethnic persecution for having been involved in the Secret War (some of the participants called it "the Vietnam War" instead of "the Secret War"), making their way to the Mekong River, and crossing the Mekong River to Thailand.

Each participant's details or lack thereof supporting these themes varied. Some participants, given their English proficiency, were more compelling and more profound in their recollections of their and their parents' lives in Laos.

Nevertheless, the majority of participants shared that their lives in Laos had become like a distant dream:

My life in Laos seems like a dream. I remember a big rice field on a hillside. I remember coming home at night from that rice field. And I remember climbing a high mountain to pick strawberries and raspberries. A picture vividly appears in my mind of my mom holding my hand and carrying my baby brother with a big basket on her back as she is picking cucumbers and delicious little bananas all at the same time.

One participant's memories of his childhood in Laos were still profound and compelling. He shared memories of growing up in his parents' village, where they had lived for many years: seeing his parents going to the farm, seeing other family members leaving their village because of diminishing resources and the military instability in Laos, and their family's eventual departure from his parents' village.

From there, he described their journey to Thailand, which included several brief stays with other family members while they waited for the right time to leave and then discretely fleeing in the middle of the night to reach Thailand. This is how he poignantly remembered some of his more innocent moments:

My family moved to Han Thai after the end of the Vietnam War. Han Thai is located about thirty-five miles from Xiengkhouang City which we called Phonsavan. Han Thai was surrounded by high mountains on three sides and covered with trees and plants. There was a small river that flowed through the village; so, people built their homes along the river banks. Our home was located on the east side of the village. Most of the villagers lived in Han Thai were all our relatives. Most of them moved with my father from the same place. Most of the villagers farmed on the east of the river.

When I stood in front of our front door in the morning, between seven and eight o'clock, I could see people going to the farm. Some of them carried a basket on their back. There was mother who had a baby on her back, and there was a father who carried a child on one of his shoulders. It was very fun to watch people going to the farm.

Several participants shared life experiences that provided keen insights into the Hmong's sophisticated, ancient, and spiritual world in Laos. Two participants mentioned that after they were born, they were very sick. After consulting with a family member or a shaman, it was determined that to cure their sickness, they must change their birth names. After they got their new names, they were not sick anymore.

This is one participant's perspective on the influences of the Hmong's preliterate and spiritual world:

About one or two years later, my sister was cursed by an evil man then she died. It all got started when my father's brother came from Laos and my father told the Thai people to go across the Mekong River to help my uncle get to Thailand.

After they crossed the Mekong River, the Thai people robbed all their money and

abandoned them. Then my father told the evil man to find my father's brother and he will pay the evil man money. The evil man did not find my father's brother but the evil man wanted his money, so my father paid him anyway. The evil man wanted my father to pay him five thousand dollars but my father did not had that much so he said he will only pay the evil man two thousand dollars. Then he did his magic and killed my sister. When my sister died my father went to kill the evil man.

### Escape to Thailand

The participants' knowledge and understanding of their escape to Thailand were shaped by the same factors as their knowledge and understanding of their lives in Laos: the memories they still had of the escape, how old they were, what they had come to learn from family members, or a combination of these. Common themes from their escape to Thailand included why they were leaving, the preparation they took for the escape, the challenges they faced along the way, and how they crossed the Mekong.

The same factors as in the life in Laos theme affected each participant's level of detail supporting the theme. One participant described why they were leaving Laos:

Laos was not worth it, and many of our relatives were in Thailand and in the U.S. Escaping to Thailand was not easy at all. Many Hmong families were killed on the way by the Laos communist soldiers because to escape the country like that meant betraying the country and its government. It was an embarrassment for them. It made the communist look bad. The Laotian government ordered the soldiers to look for those who planned to escape. Whoever got caught would surely not be alive. My family was very scared. But, you just had to take your chances, and it was a fifty/fifty chance.

The same participant elaborated on the challenges they faced:

We left all of our belongings behind. We traveled for three weeks through the jungle with two other families. On the way, I was very scared. We could smell the dead human flesh and saw the skeletons of people who had died while trying to escape, like us. It was very dark when we got near the Mekong River. We could hear gunfire from the Laos communist soldiers. I thought we were going to get killed. I knew the soldiers were very close to us, and I was very frightened for my family.

This participant revealed the danger and uncertainty of crossing the Mekong River:

The Vietnamese came to live in the Mekong River and whoever tried to pass the Mekong River to Thailand would get killed by the Vietnamese. My family crossed the Mekong River at 10:00 P.M. A lot of people Hmong died in the Mekong River because many people were know how to swim, so they drown in the Mekong River. Some shot by the Vietnamese at the time as they tried to cross the Mekong River.

### Refugee Camp Life

Again, the participants' knowledge and understanding of their lives in refugee camps were affected by the same factors as their lives in Laos and their escape to Thailand: how old they were when they were in camp, how long they stayed in the refugee camp(s), the memories they still had of their time there, what they had come to learn from family members, or a combination of these.

For those who were old enough to remember, their memories were quite conflicting. They had fond memories and devastating and tragic ones. Their fond memories included fishing, hunting, playing with friends, roaming the market, going to school, sewing, doing house chores, and their enthusiasm learning that they were coming to America. Their devastating and tragic ones included lack of food, the poor conditions of the camps, losing loved ones, and not having loved ones around because they died or were captured on the way out of Laos.

The longest a participant's family stayed in one of the camps was 18 years. His family was one of the first families to live in Ban Vinai. His description of those early years,

One of the most critical things that we faced were the "Thai soldiers" who were sent to the camp site by the Thai Government to protect and supervise the refugee camp boundary. Their mission was to make sure that all the refugees were safe and secure, but instead of protecting the refugees, they were the ones that robbed the refugees, stole their belongings, especially their silver and gold, raped their wives and daughters, and killed whoever they wanted to. The refugees couldn't retaliate or even dare to speak out. Thai soldiers were armed and they had the authority and power to conquer the camp. Refugees had to obey the soldiers' orders; otherwise, we would be tortured, taken away from our family, and easily be killed.

Another participant painted a gloomy picture of camp conditions:

I remember people dying in the streets because of starvation. I also remember walking home one day with my dad and

seeing people arguing about food prices being too high. The camps were very run down and people were catching sicknesses from everyone. Diseases were very widespread and there were many different kinds of illnesses. Typhus was a very common disease. The people couldn't be treated quickly enough because the doctors were very limited. The food that was given to us was not very fresh but we had to take it because we didn't have enough money to buy the food from the stores. Many families did not ration their food supply very well. This became a problem because then the family would have to go for days without food, go ask some friends for handouts, or go and talk to the Thai and ask for more food.

A most devastating memory was a participant witnessing her grandmother being staked in the backyard of the police station and then burned. She still remembered that horrific, terrifying experience:

As soon as our family came to the [police] station, they took Grandma out into the courtyard and brought out a stake. They then tied her and started a fire around her. I was still small and didn't really know what was happening but my dad did. He cried and shouted for them to stop but they kept on throwing gasoline on her and then they lit a match. They killed her right in front of my dad and his family. There were many people from the village there.

As expected, the participants' genders greatly influenced and defined many of their daily life activities and chores while they were living in the refugee camp. Male participants' daily life activities entailed going to school, fishing, hunting, playing sports and games with friends, and going to the New Year. Female participants' daily life activities entailed sewing, doing house chores, going to school, and going to the New Year.

### Coming to the U.S.

For the participants' journeys to the U.S., I identified "as they were leaving their refugee camp and were making their way to Phanatnikhom" as the starting point, and "as they officially landed at their destination in the United States" as the end point. Phanatnikhom was their final stay before their flight to the U.S.

One participant remembered leaving their refugee camp for the last time:

When it was time for us to come to America, my grandpa, grandma, aunts, uncles, and sisters were crying. They were crying because they thought it was sad. I was sad too. In the morning when we were picked up, my grandma told me that she

didn't want me to go because she loves me. I didn't say anything to her because I didn't know what to say to her. My family and the other families that were going to America got on the bus.

This participant captured the many activities on their way to Phanatnikhom:

When we are on our way to the camp (Phab Nab Nib Khoos), I saw many beautiful things like flowers, houses and birds. I also saw many Thai people walking down the street. They were throwing water at each other. They were celebrating the New Years, and we were just passing by it. It took us one day to get there.

While at Phanatnikhom, the participants learned English in preparation for their new lives in the U.S. The stay at Phanatnikhom was typically six months; for some, it was longer. All portrayed life in Phanatnikhom as being different and worse than life in prior camp(s). Life in Phanatnikhom was more strict and confined. As one participant put it,

In that camp, I went fishing and hunting. I went to watch TV, and play marbles with friends for money. Outside of that camp it was very dangerous so people could not go out of it. You could not even buy things from the outsider. If the security saw you buy stuff from the outsider, he would catch you, and punish you for breaking the rules. I saw many people get punished like that for leaving the camp or buying stuff from the outsider. One day I went hunting with my sling shot outside the camp. I do not know how it happened, but one security saw me out there. He came and chased me. He held a long knife with a long rope. I ran about one half mile. I jumped over the long fence and over the small river to get away from him. I was very lucky that he did not catch me. I was scared to death. After that I never went outside the camp again.

After learning that they were on their way to the U.S., the participants then told of how they were bussed to the airport. One participant briefly described the experience:

There were six buses coming to pick up the ones that had been picked to come to the U.S. We were on the third bus. It took us a half day to reach the airport.

Another participant shed more light on the last stretch of their journey:

We took the bus to Bangkok [the capital city of Thailand]. We left the camp at midnight. By the time we got there, it was six in the morning. We waited for the airplane for two hours. Then the Thai people told us that our plane was here, so we went up the elevator and to the airplane.

At the airport they were surprised and amazed, because none of them had previously seen a modernized airport or a commercial airplane, and most of their departing flights were at night. This participant metaphorically captured the feeling many Hmong had as they were leaving the world they knew:

When my family boarded the plane, we felt as if an old life had come to pass with a new one sprouting.

Their flights took them from Bangkok to Hong Kong or Tokyo and then to one of the major U.S. airports, including Seattle, Honolulu, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. One participant remembered,

I remember when I was in the airplane flying over to America. I saw many big and small airplanes outside the airport. I saw many mountains when I looked out the window. I saw long rivers, lakes, and beautiful clouds. Our first landing was in Japan. I saw many Japanese people, and I thought why they have black hair like us too. I thought that they were Hmong, but they were not. I was so confused about it, that I didn't know where we were. I asked my dad where we were and my dad said we were in Japan. That is how I knew that we were in Japan.

With a few exceptions (Los Angeles and Denver), all involved then took a connecting domestic flight to Chicago or Minneapolis, and finally, those whose destination was not Chicago or Minneapolis/St. Paul took another connecting flight to their final destinations, most of which were in Wisconsin. This participant shared their family's welcome at their destination:

When we landed in Appleton airport, it was very dark outside and it was probably ten o'clock. It was in the summer of June, 1989. All my cousins, and all my uncles came to pick us up there. They were crying and crying because it was so long since we saw each other during the Vietnam War.

Not all participants initially came to Wisconsin or were born in Wisconsin. One was born in Colorado, and two in Illinois. Others lived in California, Minnesota, and Michigan before moving to Wisconsin.

### **Life in the U.S.**

The participants' life experiences in the U.S. varied widely. The variations in their lives were affected by the following factors:

Where they were born (Laos, Thailand, or the U.S.);

The length of time they had been in the

U.S. (around two years for those who were born outside of the U.S. and around 14 for those who were born in the U.S.);

Their educational experience (some started kindergarten, and a few started middle or high school);

Where they first lived in the U.S. (some did not come directly to Appleton);

Where they were born in the U.S. (some were born outside of Wisconsin);

Whether they were single or married (one participant was married and had children);

How well they adjusted to their new world, that is, school, community, family, and so on;

Even for participants who had lived in the Fox Cities (Appleton, Neenah, Menasha, Kaukuana, Hortonville, etc.) all their lives, how widely their lives varied.

Participants who were not born in the U.S. shared many common life experiences: living with relatives before moving out, the strange experiences of their families now living in a new place, the discomfort and uncertainty of going to school because they did not speak English, the challenges they faced in school, and their adjustment to their new lives.

One participant provided a vivid snapshot of his family's first experiences:

When my family reached Appleton, many of our cousins came to pick us up at the airport. Our first month in Appleton was the best; we stayed in a different house every day and slept in a different house every night. When we were living on our own house, it was the most difficult and scariest time for everyone in the family, because we did not know how to get from place to place. One time when my sister and I were going for a walk around the block we got lost. We did not know what to do except to keep on walking and see where we would end up. It was getting dark and then a bus passed by. I think that the bus driver knew my sister, because he took us to the police station and then the police took us home. I don't know how the policeman knew where we lived, because we did not mention where we lived to him. After this, I have never gotten lost again. When winter came, my family was in deep trouble, because we did not know to prepare for the winter. All of my sisters and brothers just wore the same clothes that they wore in the summer.

Many participants mentioned that their lives in the U.S. are much better than their lives in Laos and Thailand, but they were not oblivious to the racism,

discrimination, and prejudice they must face at school and in the community.

One participant gave advice on how to deal with racism and discrimination:

Now, life runs smoother than back in Thailand. But there are many problems I still face today, like racism, hatred, and discrimination against me or my people. In the world, we all should be treated the same. It doesn't matter if you are black or white or yellow or all sources of colors. Why do some people think they are better than others? This are things we have to find for ourselves in the future in order to live peacefully among each other.

For those who were born in the U.S., adjustment to their new world was not any easier:

I was born on September 28, 1980 at Louise A. Weiss Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. We moved around a lot in Illinois: from Chicago to Wheaton to probably somewhere else. Then we moved to Kaukauna, Wisconsin.

It was a dark night on June 3, 1979. My mother was having pain. The pain was because she was having contractions. My father and relative rushed my mother to the Denver General Hospital. There she went through two hours of painful labor, and finally at 12:29 I was born into the world. It was hard for my parents to care for me as a baby. This was because they had only been in the country for a couple of months and did not have a place to stay. They then slept and practically lived in the basement of the church. It was both my parents, my six brothers, two sisters, and me.

This participant captured all the participants' realities of life in the U.S.:

As I think back though, I see how lucky I was to be born in the U.S., to get an education at an early age, and to know English fluently since my family did not have that sort of opportunity, but life in the U.S. is also filled with hardships and troubles too.

### **Future: Hopes and Dreams**

In my dream and in my life, it seems like it is going to be hard for me in all my life.

Except for this participant, who expressed an expectation for and seemed to accept a rather pessimistic future, many participants envisioned a future that involves hard work, doing the best they can, learning from their mistakes and successes, and preserving their cultural identity as Hmong. These life principles are aligned with those of prior Hmong generations.

Some of the participants were specific in what they were going to do with their future: go to college; become successful; one

day visit Laos and Thailand again; and go into a specific profession, such as business, communications, or education.

This participant already had his future planned out:

For my future plan, I would like to graduate from high school and go to college. The college I would like to attend is UW-Oshkosh. I would like to take an academy class because I want to be a detective. I might go to college for four years or more. I don't want to be a police officer because I don't want to wear the heavy utilities and equipment.

A participant who had struggled to make the best of his educational experience and the best choices in life imparted these learned life lessons:

Right now, I'm still going to school. I could have finished high school by now, but I goofed off too much in the beginning. Now, I regret everything that I did. I wish that I never did that, but if I had a chance to change my past, I would do it all over again, because I needed to learn. Though I learned the hard way, it doesn't mean that everybody else should learn it that way, too.

For another participant, his future was greatly influenced by his renewed commitment to God:

The greatest thing that has changed my life forever is when I came back to Jesus Christ and God. For a long time, I have been like a lost sheep wandering through the fields without a Shepard to guide me in the right path. I have always knew that Jesus was there for me if I wanted him in my life, but somehow I just never had time for him. I was always running around acting hard and tough that no one could hurt me. I did not care about anything, or anyone especially my family which have supported and tried so hard to raise me up right. I can still remember the day when I ask God and Jesus to come back into my life and be my Shepard and guide me to the right path.

The same participant also shared that his renewed commitment to God did not mean giving up on his cultural identity:

As I look at my future and my plans I hope that I will stay in close touch with my Hmong culture and friends, who have greatly affected me.

One participant mentioned how their published autobiographies could one day be used as a resource by others to learn more about the Hmong American experience:

Just to think, if this book is a success, I would be one of the 12 people who produce

this book. And if this book keeps on going year after year, they can look back and say that these people are the ones that started this job.

As for the participant who was a father, his future had shifted to how to provide a better future for his two children and family:

Now, my life is my children and my children are my life. I try to teach them what I have learned about the rights and wrongs in life. I show them and teach them to love, to care, and to respect other people because there might not be a tomorrow, for life is short, and time is forever.... My children and wife are everything to me. They are my life, my hope, my dreams, and my future.

### **Two Decades Later: Where Are They Today?**

Over two decades later, where are some of these participants, many of whom are now in their mid- to late 30s? As a member of the same community in the 1990s as these participants, I knew some of them. Today, I am aware of some of their past and present circumstances:

One graduated from college and went on to serve the Hmong community in several leadership capacities.

Another graduated from college and is currently working for a local company in the area.

Two graduated from college and moved on to establish their careers in Minnesota.

One is currently an insurance sales agent in the area.

One moved around, worked in various business sectors, and is now back in town to be closer to his parents and other family members.

One took over his parents' business in the area.

Except for one, all are married and raising a family.

Of the seven, four remained in the area.

### **Conclusion**

The participants' voices about how they had come to understand, interpret, and make meaning of their journey (life in Laos, life in Thailand, life in the U.S., challenges, successes, and future hopes and dreams) add to and shed more light on the many existing anecdotal stories in the Hmong communities, documentaries (Levine, 1982; Taggart & McSilver, 2001), and books (Hamilton-Merritt, 1999; Hillmer, 2015; Long, 1993; Pfeifer, Chiu, &

Yang, 2013; Quincy, 2011; D. Yang, 1993) about the Hmong American diaspora.

The depth and quality of each participant's autobiography seem to be affected by several variables: how long the participant has been in the U.S., their academic skills, their communication skills, and how much they are willing to disclose their life story.

In other words, the literary substance of the autobiographies vastly differs: some are detailed and thorough; some are terse; some are fragmented; and some lack contextual meaning. Nevertheless, these variations in the participants' autobiographies are representative of the diversity that exists among Hmong American middle and high school students' life and academic experiences.

Many participants were thankful to have been a part of the Appleton YMCA's SYEP. They had learned more about themselves and about their culture, history, and heritage. They had also learned many valuable life skills, including interviewing skills, writing skills, and socialization skills. Some hoped that SYEP would continue for many more years to come. Unfortunately, the program ended after three cohorts.

Would continuation of the SYEP program have helped other Hmong American students in a similar fashion? Today, components of the SYEP can be found implemented into various Hmong charter school programs and curricula or are a part of many Hmong and non-Hmong community organizations.

Several participants shared how many of their responsibilities, expectations, and daily life chores and activities were defined by their gender. Lor (2012, 2013) and Lee (1997) explored these influences and how they have changed over the last four decades.

The achievements of Mee Moua (the first Hmong American state senator in Minnesota), Dia Cha (former St. Cloud University associate professor), Bao Vang (executive director of Hmong American Partnership in Minnesota), Chou Yee Vang (associate professor at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee), May See Yang (associate professor at University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point), Kristy Yang (recently elected judge to Milwaukee County Circuit Court in Wisconsin), among many other well-accomplished Hmong professional women, are evidence of the roles and responsibilities Hmong women have expanded beyond the cultural parameters shared by the participants and the past.

Many participants came to learn of

their pasts from their parents and from the interviews they conducted through the YMCA's SYEP. None mentioned learning about their history in a formal educational setting. Over the last several decades, proponents and advocates for establishing state legislation to require preK-12 school districts to teach Hmong history and culture and the Secret War have not been successful.

The emergence of technology, particularly social media, along with Hmong charter schools, and Hmong community organizations continue to carry on this critical responsibility. Giving the recent violence of non-Hmong against Hmong individuals (recent shooting in Junction City, Wisconsin) and vice versa (Chia Vang and Nengmy Vang), the need to infuse Hmong culture and history in the preK-12 school curriculum is critical and urgent.

Several participants mentioned how their families' cultural and religious practices (shamanism/animism and Christianity) affected them. More than two decades later, from personal observations and anecdotal stories, both cultural and religious practices will continue to play critical roles in the Hmong communities. More recently emerging and competing cultural and religious movements (atheism to Kev Ntseeg Leej Niam) have also started to influence the Hmong community, adding more dynamics to the Hmong American diaspora.

Looking at the participants' hopes and dreams, it is intriguing to find out where everyone is today and to get their perspectives on how their lives had unfolded over the last two decades. The few participants I knew and had recently come across seem to be doing well; they have established careers and families and are involved in efforts to advance their communities.

Finally, the study, exploratory and descriptive in nature and with limitations, raises several opportunities for future research, including qualitative, quantitative, or mixed studies, such as the following:

One research opportunity arises from the fact that, because the data came from one group of Hmong American middle and high school students, the study protocols can be duplicated or modified to study other Hmong American middle and high school students in different cities, states, and types of educational environments (charter schools, private schools, religious schools, etc.).

Another research opportunity is to examine variables beyond the autobiographies in the study that could offer different

perspectives and dimensions to the Hmong American middle and high school student life experienced, in particular, a phenomenological, qualitative study that examines and combines the voices of multiple groups of Hmong American middle and high school students.

Lastly, longitudinal studies could be done with other, similar samplings. For example, a longitudinal study following similar samplings of Hmong American middle and high school students for a period of 5, 10, 15, and 20 years, examining various aspects and dynamics of their lives, could provide more critical insights into the transformation of Hmong American middle and high school students' diaspora.

Findings from these additional studies would add more humanity to and further legitimize the essence of Hmong American students' life experiences.

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