The Migrations of the Hmong
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The Hmong have an amazing story. Their place in history has been full of travel, adventure, and difficulty. They have experienced both triumph and tragedy during their existence, but most of it has been tragedy. They have survived many hard things, and throughout all the conflicts they have seen, they are often misunderstood. Now, through many hard trials, they have been forced to move to America, the land of freedom. However, even there they are still misunderstood. As we will see, the Hmong have endured much to come here, and so we ought to welcome them. As fair American citizens, we must study their history so that we will no longer misunderstand them, studying them from beginning to end. This is important to do because the Hmong are becoming common in America, and we must be able to help them adjust to a new land and become everything they can be in it. With this purpose in mind, let us go over their history.

Their origins are unclear – no one knows for sure where they originally came from. Their folktales indicate that they may have originated from Siberia, Mongolia, or perhaps Mesopotamia, the ancient Cradle of Civilization. We know for sure, however, that they were living in the plains along the Yellow River in China by 2700 B.C., when Chinese historical records mentioned them. They stayed there for over four thousand years, holding on to their own unique traditions and beliefs. However, then the Chinese began taxing them severely and trying to regulate their lifestyle. This was contrary to the core values of the Hmong; they wanted to keep their ancient heritage. To keep their heritage,
they fought back fiercely, fighting so the Chinese would treat them fairly\(^1\). When the Chinese became too strong for them, however, most Hmong moved to Indochina (now Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and northern Burma), beginning in around 1810 and continuing until about 1840. There they settled in the high mountains and began living happily and peacefully again. They were very self-sufficient, as we can see from what one Hmong man said of this time:

‘Mostly our people, the Hmong people who lived on mountain were farmers working on the field, raising crops such as rice, corn, potatoes, all kinds of vegetables. We had various animals, chicken, pig, buffalo, goats, many kinds of animals that we raised up there. We sold our crops to the land people like rice, corn, pig, buffaloes and cows, and those kinds of animals to help us. And other Laotian people in the lowland, they also did a lot of crops like rice and also corn and squash and they raised animals and also fish. We did a lot of things over there to support our life.’\(^2\)

Then the French came along in 1893 and established a protectorate in Laos, taking control of the area. The French followed the example of the Chinese and imposed high taxes on the Hmong once again. This resulted in several rebellions, which were mostly

\(^1\) (Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens 61)  
\(^2\) (D.C. Everest Area Schools 59-60)
unsuccessful. Fortunately for the Hmong, however, the Geneva Conference of 1954 ended French rule. This happened to be around the time that World War II ended and the Cold War began. When the Cold War began, Laos was named an independent and neutral country. This meant that Laos would be neither communist nor non-communist. However, this was not how things really were. A Communist group began to materialize in Laos, called the Pathet Lao. Vietnam was torn in half, the north communist, and the south non-communist. The Communist North Vietnam began to work with the Pathet Lao to make Laos and the countries near it communist. However, the peoples of these countries did not want to become Communist. One newspaper stated that Thailand was among ‘our best anti-Communist friends’\(^3\). Laos was much the same way. The Hmong did not want the communists to take over their country.

The American CIA did not want Laos to become Communist either. In around 1960, the CIA talked to an outstanding Hmong soldier named Vang Pao. They wanted to make him the leader of a secret army in Laos to fight back against the communists. The CIA promised him as much American, CIA-based help as possible and a new place to live if they lost the war. Vang Pao accepted their offer and began gathering his army. He and his soldiers became guerillas, trying to fend off the armies of the North Vietnamese and the Pathet Lao. The secret war had begun.

\(^3\) (Hill A-21)
The North Vietnamese went along the Ho Chi Minh Trail to invade South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the Tet Offensive. The Hmong often helped American pilots shot down along the Ho Chi Minh Trail escape.

The Hmong fought with everything they had to protect their country, but with great costs. Many Hmong were dying – they ‘were destined to lose one quarter of their entire population’\(^4\), according to one source. And when the young men were killed, boys were sent in to take their places. Some have said that if the war had continued much longer than it had, ‘few Hmong men between the ages of fourteen and fifty would have remained to sire the next generation’\(^5\). In fact, some were only boys of eleven when they joined the war. Imagine an American boy being forced to fight for his freedom at eleven years old! But that is what the Hmong people had to do during the secret wars for Laos.

Even worse, many of these Hmong soldiers were not trained to go into battle. One Hmong soldier recalled, ‘I did not have much training to be a soldier … They gave me a parachute and orders to jump from a helicopter into the jungle. American soldiers hid there. We rescued them or brought maps and other supplies. It was very dangerous. You never knew when the enemy was hiding there, too.’\(^6\)

To the American and Hmong soldiers, the war was the only reality. To the lawmakers in Washington, however, politics was the only reality. The lawmakers

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\(^4\) (Alisa 42)
\(^5\) (Hmong and American: From Refugees to Citizens 65)
\(^6\) (Cohen 6-7)
decided that all Americans must leave Laos and the Hmong. The Vientiane Agreement of 1973 decreed their decision.

Most of the Hmong did not know that the Americans were about to leave. When, in 1975, they saw that all the Americans had left them, they felt betrayed and angry. Even Vang Pao had been flown out of Laos. However, they could do nothing. The Hmong went back to their houses as the Communists took control of Laos. The former soldiers left the country, knowing that the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao would kill them if they found out that they had fought in the war. However, some Hmong resistance groups were still fighting in a last desperate attempt to keep off the communists. This course of action backfired. The Pathet Lao and the Soviet Union began dropping chemicals on the Hmong by airplane, trying to destroy the resistance groups. The Hmong called these chemicals “yellow rain,” though they came in all different colors. The chemicals covered the food and water sources. The Hmong ate, drank, and were poisoned. They saw strange liquids dripping off tree leaves and branches, touched them, and became sick and died. Many of those poisoned were not in any resistance groups, but the communists did not care. Here is what one Hmong man said about his experience with the yellow rain:

‘It was everyday [sic] that an airplane would pass over and then all of a sudden it started to rain some yellow stuff. We thought it was normal and we didn’t have a clue that it would cause serious problems. Before we knew it, our people were getting severe stomachaches, some were getting rashes that would start decaying, high fevers, and when using the bathroom, people had difficulty. People were dying left and right and we still didn’t know what the cause was. So then, after some time of suffering terribly some
people came into the village and told us about the use of chemicals. After we were told this we started to see this yellow rain substance on the leaves of bananas and trees.\(^7\)

The Hmong called for help, since no one was supposed to drop chemicals on them. However, no one believed their story. Some people said the yellow stuff was just bee pollen, and that became the major theory. The Hmong were angry. What then of the other colors of poisons? Why did all these strange Hmong deaths coincide with the coming of the ‘bee pollen’? Why were the Hmong getting sick, and no other people groups? Nevertheless, no one listened to them.

All these troubles in Laos forced many Hmong to flee from Laos into Thailand, which was a much safer place. However, even this was not an easy thing to do. There were always Communist soldiers to dodge. In addition, the Mekong River lay between Laos and Thailand. This river was huge, much like the Mississippi River in America. To get across, families needed to either find something that would float, or swim. Moreover, the Hmong were taught that evil spirits would pull a swimmer down into the water, which meant that few Hmong knew how to swim. Each man of an escaping family had to tie his children and female relatives to him and tow them across the fierce Mekong, without the Communist guards watching the river catching so much as a glimpse of them. It is no surprise that the Mekong soon had dead bodies lining its banks. Besides this, even if a family did manage to cross the Mekong, their troubles were still not over. They had to enter one of the refugee camps set up in Thailand, which were often boring and crowded. One Hmong woman said of her experience, ‘It was poor because there was

\(^7\) (D.C. Everest Area Schools 125)
no food, and my father had died during our escape. It was really hard on us.⁸ These few words give us a glimpse of all the tragedy to be seen in these camps.

So what did the Hmong do after they had escaped from Laos? Some chose to remain in Thailand for years, hoping that the war in Laos would soon end. However, this did not happen, and Thailand eventually began closing all its refugee camps. The Hmong had to be repatriated, or taken back to their own country, if they did not first move to some other country. Moreover, no Hmong wanted to go back to his homeland with the Communists in control. It was death to go back to Laos. This brought many Hmong to safer countries, such as America or France. In fact, there are now Hmong in all the five continents of the world⁹. And America has gotten its share of the refugees. By 1990, there were about 100,000 Hmong refugees in America. Now about 250,000 to 300,000 Hmong have immigrated here. Wisconsin has the highest population of Hmong, after California and Minnesota.

The Hmong came here to find safety, but it was hard for them to adapt to the new culture. One Hmong man said, ‘When I got off the plane, I didn’t think of anything except that you didn’t have any relatives or friends and I was all alone. Plus, I didn’t speak the language and I didn’t know how I was going to live here’.¹⁰ A Hmong woman who had been a girl at the time said, ‘It was so strange to hear people talking, but not be able to

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⁸ (D.C. Everest Area Schools 91)
⁹ (Alisa 26)
¹⁰ (D.C. Everest Area Schools 101)
understand what they were saying ... It was like having the radio on and hearing nothing but static. \(^1\) You can see how stressful this must have been for them. Still, they went through with it because they knew they would be safe nowhere else. Here they hoped to finally find peace.

And, to an extent, they did. Although racism still threatens them, there is no war aimed toward their deaths. They and their families need have no fear of death or separation. They have relative peace. Moreover, they have proven their resilience as a people. Even though they have suffered much, being the underdogs at every point in their history, they have still survived, and thus proven their strength. And because they were so strong, they have at last found peace. This is the great triumph of the Hmong people that came out of all their suffering.

How are the Hmong doing, now that they have reached a peaceful land? They are adapting, once again. The children are learning English and the customs of America. They are learning how to act like people of European descent. Unfortunately, though, they are starting to forget their heritage and ancient culture to which they have clung so long. They are beginning to take American culture as their own, deserting the Hmong culture. Older Hmong are concerned. They try to advise Hmong youth to stay in school and get a good education, but to remember their past and the culture and heritage their ancestors had.

They are concerned with good education for a reason. As of 2012, 5.0% have not graduated from high school; 19.8% have only a high school degree; and 17.7 % have a

\(^1\) (Cohen 19)
graduate or professional degree. Though these percentages seem small, consider how essential it is for white Americans to graduate from high school, not to mention college. This is not good for the Hmong. Fortunately, many people are working to improve their situation. A Hmong man named Bruce Thao is the Director of Programs for Hmong American Partnership (HAP) and the Hmong National Development (HND). He has worked hard to help his people. He researches, does clinical work, and advocates for the Hmong. A Hmong woman named Kabzuag Vaj is the Executive Director of Freedom, Inc. She tries to prevent domestic violence, which is all too common with Hmong women, and advocates for financially limited ethnic groups, including the Hmong. Wisconsin, as the home of a great number of Hmong, is also doing its part. One Wisconsin program gives aid to Hmong students to help them become teachers. In Wausau, Hmong people are taught cooking, sewing, employment skills, English, and ways of preserving Hmong art; the same program encourages understanding of Hmong culture. Thus the condition of the Hmong is slowly being improved.

In conclusion, we see that the Hmong came to America to find peace. Though they sought peace in a few different countries, they were still not able to find it. We, however, have the opportunity to change that trend. We can help them live in peace, adapting to our country but still keeping their unique culture. Now that we understand their history and what they have suffered to come here, we will be able to welcome them as our new neighbors into a land of peace.

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