Hmong Americans:
Their Sacrifice and Resettlement

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The United States is an extremely diverse country, but have you ever stopped to consider how many different ethnicities and minorities there really are? They all have their stories about coming to America, and the Hmong are no different. The Hmong are a people native to Laos, which is located in southeast Asia, west of Vietnam. As of 2010, there were over 250,000 Hmong in the United States.\(^1\) After America lost the Vietnam War, hundreds of thousands of Hmong were affected. Despite the triumph of being able to immigrate to America, they had to tragically leave behind their homeland. They’ve come to call the United States home after helping the Americans in the Vietnam War and being forced to flee when it was lost.

**What events led up to it?**

There were many events that led up to the mass immigration of Hmong to the United States. Laos and Vietnam were part of French Indochina until the 1940s. Then, a man named Ho Chi Minh came to power in Vietnam and led the Laotians and Vietnamese to drive out the French. However, Minh, who believed in Communism, wasn’t satisfied. At the Geneva Conference in 1954, it was decided that Vietnam would be split into the North and South, the North being controlled by Minh and Vietnamese Communists, and the South being democratic. Although both sides wanted a united country, they did not agree on how this country was to be run. This was the main reason that the Vietnam War started. Minh wanted to model it after other communist countries, but the South did not agree. Elections were to be held regarding the

unification of North and South, and the United States began to get involved. The U.S. was afraid of the domino effect, which is a series of related events occurring as a direct and inevitable result of one initial event. America believed that if one South Asian country became communist, others were sure to follow. To prevent this, they declared their support for South Vietnam in 1955. By 1959, battles had broken out between the North and South Vietnamese armies, and the war began.

In the same year, the American CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) approached General Vang Pao (see Appendix A) of the Hmong people with an offer. The Hmong are a group of people indigenous to the highlands of Laos, where they lived in their villages, independent from Laos. The Hmong knew that their way of life was being threatened by the possibility of communism in Laos and Vietnam, and wanted to keep their freedom that they’d had for thousands of years. “They [Americans] came and made promises about Hmong, Hmong people helping the Americans. General Vang Pao had asked in what way they wanted help. At the time, the Americans were engaged in warfare in Southern Vietnam,” says Chong Neng Xiong. “They wanted us to be a secret army to cut the path where the Vietnamese soldiers cross from Laos into Southern Vietnam.” The Hmong agreed, and began to help the Americans in their war. They fought enemy forces, rescued U.S. pilots, helped to gather intelligence, and more. However, in 1973, America began pulling troops out of Vietnam, and in 1975, the North Vietnamese

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3 Chong Neng Xiong was a Hmong who fought in the Vietnam War as a soldier in America’s secret war. Ibid, p. 4-5
overtook Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital. America and South Vietnam had lost the war.

After the war ended, the U.S. all but abandoned the Hmong to fend for themselves against the retaliation of the Communist Vietnamese. Only a few hundred Hmong, including Vang Pao, were airlifted out of Laos after the war ended (see Appendix B). The North Vietnamese knew that the Hmong had helped South Vietnam during the war, and they were not going to be lenient. The Hmong knew this, and that they had to escape on their own.

How were Hmong affected when they immigrated here?

“They fought with us and they paid the highest price...If the Hmong were good enough to fight and die for us, they have to be good enough to resettle,” said a State Department official who assisted in Hmong resettlement. It’s estimated that 10 to 25 percent of all Hmong died during or after the Vietnam War. After the Vietnam War ended, the Hmong in Laos were persecuted by Communist Vietnam, and had no allies there to aid them. Villages were burned and thousands were killed during the raids. Even chemical weapons such as napalm were used by the Vietnamese against the Hmong.

But even before the attacks began, the Hmong knew that the consequences of their aid of the United States could be fatal. The Hmong first began emigrating to

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5 Ibid. p. 3.
6 Ibid. p. 4.
7 Ibid. p. 5.
America in 1976. Tens of thousands of them began to make their way to Thailand, where refugee camps were being set up. They had to cross the Mekong River, which serves as the border between Laos and Thailand. Once in a refugee camp, a Hmong had to apply for a refugee visa before they could come to America. There was no telling when they would be selected to emigrate, but if they were, they would be settled in a specific place in the U.S., where they had a sponsor to help them find jobs and housing. Hmong immigrants gained refugee status mainly because of their efforts in the war. They could have been in the camps for years or decades before getting permission to resettle.

In the 1990s, twenty years after the Vietnam War ended, the United Nations shut down its refugee office in Laos and the U.S. had no plans to resettle more Hmong. All of the Hmong that were still in Thailand were stranded. In 1999, last refugee camp in Thailand was officially closed, and then the repatriation efforts began. The remaining Hmong were to be sent back to Laos, despite their protests. The U.S. insisted that it was safe, but the Hmong knew that when they returned, they would be persecuted and killed. In 2004, though, the United States agreed to let 15,000 Hmong living in a makeshift refugee camp emigrate to America. The Thai government took different action, however. In 2005, Hmong refugees in Thailand were denied food in an attempt to repatriate them to Laos. There were fines of over $1,200 if Thai citizens were found sheltering Hmong, who were deemed illegal immigrants. In 2007, thousands of Hmong were repatriated back to Laos. A reporter for the New York Times, Seth Mydan wrote,

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9 “Hmong: Becoming Minnesotan.”  
10 Hays. p. 6.  
11 Ibid. p. 6.
“In a quick, one day operation, Thai soldiers with riot shields and clubs evicted more than 4,000 Hmong asylum seekers from a holding center and forcibly repatriated them to Laos, where they say they face retribution from their government. Thailand acted despite protests from the United Nations and other human rights groups.”

Although the mass exodus out of Laos began in 1975, only a couple thousand Hmong refugees came into the U.S. between 1981 and 1986. Between 1987 and 1994, admissions really picked up, and more than 50,000 Hmong immigrated to America during that time. By the year 2000, Hmong immigrants in America numbered at almost 170,000. Despite the government’s best efforts to spread the Hmong throughout the country, the Hmong have a collectivist nature, and 89 percent of immigrants ended up settling themselves in the Midwest and California. The Midwest is similar to their home back in Laos with its hills, forests, and farms, which is part of why so many Hmong settled there. According to the 2010 census, there are 126,713 Hmong settled in the Midwest.

Life in America was an enormous change for the Hmong. A large portion of the Hmong immigrants were poorly educated and didn’t possess any modern job skills, so it was hard for them to find a job. They were used to farming back in Laos, but it’s hard to continue that career in America because of the land costs and all of the technology and equipment that Hmong refugees have probably never heard of before. Dentice. p. 3.

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12 Ibid. p. 16.
15 Dentice. p. 3.
The Hmong came to America much less prepared than other immigrant groups, and had to pay the price. They were not on their own, though. In the Twin Cities area especially, farming projects were created to help create Hmong self-sufficiency, such as the Minnesota Agricultural Enterprise for New Americans (MAENA), established by the University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension Services. There was also the Hiawatha Valley Farm Cooperative (HVFC), formed by the Church World Service, a cooperative organization of nearly 40 Christian denominations.\(^{16}\)

Although the United States had better opportunities than Laos did, the Hmong struggled to assimilate, as it was such a different economic structure than they were used to. There was also an enormous language barrier, because the refugees had spoken Hmong for their entire lives and, upon coming to America, had to learn an entirely new language. Of course, it has been four decades since the first Hmong immigrants arrived in America, and their lives have changed drastically since then.

**How has it changed for Hmong today?**

“In a way, I’m glad we come here. But in a way, it’s sad how we have to come here,” says Maysoua Thao, a Hmong immigrant.\(^{17}\) It’s been four decades since the first Hmong immigrated to America. They’ve had years to adapt and start their new lives. Minnesota has the second highest Hmong population in America with just over 66,000 as of 2010. They are second only to California with 91,000. Wisconsin has the third

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\(^{17}\) Thao, Maysoua and Emily Norton. Personal Interview at Maysoua’s home, Hartford, WI. 26 Feb. 2019.
highest population of Hmong with nearly 50,000. Together, Hmong in Minnesota make over $100 million in revenues annually. They have become an asset to local communities and our country.

Coming to America presented a lot of opportunities to Hmong that they’d never had before. They're able to go to school and pursue a better education than they ever could have had in Laos, as well as get better careers. Now, younger Hmong are learning organic farming so that they may continue the way they used to in Laos. Many doors were opened -- for girls especially. A Hmong immigrant named Ia Yang said, “In Laos, women don’t have the opportunity to do anything. Here, I can have school, jobs. In Laos, I would have never been to school. It’s so much better here.” Hmong women have made substantial achievements in education. In 1990, only 19 percent of Hmong women in America had a high school diploma, in contrast to the 44 percent of Hmong men. Only three percent of women had a bachelor’s degree, and men had seven percent. Now, however, the percentages of Hmong women with bachelor’s degrees have surpassed those of men, showing how far they have come. Some Hmong, such as Senator Mee Moua, have made history with their lives in America. When she became one of Minnesota’s senators in 2002, Moua was not only the first Hmong, but the first Southeastern Asian American to serve at a state level in the United States.

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19 Dentice. p. 4  
21 “Hmong and Hmong Americans in Minnesota.” p. 4.  
Although they have become much more successful and essential to their communities, it is not as easy as it may seem. Poverty remains a problem for countless Hmong. One main point of struggle for them is education. Due to such an overwhelming language barrier, it is hard for first generation Hmong to get the schooling they need to get a job to support their families. However, even Hmong youth have poor performance averages on standardized tests. They drop out of schools disproportionately high rates (40 percent) compared to whites (20 percent), Hispanics (27 percent), and African Americans (31 percent). As of 2010, only 14.5 percent of Hmong held degrees for college, compared to the 31.4 percent of whites. This shows that just because the Hmong have settled in better does not mean that they have fully overcome the challenges facing them in their new lives.

The Hmong still struggle with their cultural identity. There was an enormous culture shock when the first wave of immigrants came from Laos, and that made it hard to assimilate into the population and settle into their new lives. Hmong elders try to keep the Hmong traditions alive, but the younger Hmong don’t make the same effort. They’ve grown up here, and never knew the way of life that their families are trying so hard to preserve. A big part of Hmong culture could be lost over the years as the price of their coming to America. Although the Hmong have been here for decades, they still are seen as outsiders by some, and discriminated against by others. Many people still think of them as refugees, and that alters how they’re treated. Doualy Xaykaothao, a Hmong and reporter for *The Atlantic*, said, referring to some time spent in Wausau, Wisconsin,

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23 “Hmong and Hmong Americans in Minnesota.” p. 3.
"It wasn't a good experience. Even when I was just jogging around town people would drive by and you know, actually shout out, 'Go back to where you came from,' or I would go on to particular assignments and people would treat me pretty badly." This shows that although there are many who have helped the Hmong in their immigration and resettlement, they haven’t overcome adversities entirely yet. However, it is partially up to the “native” United States citizens to accept the Hmong and the fact that they are here to stay.

The Hmong sacrificed everything to fight in the Secret War with the United States and lost their homeland. However, until 1997, their contributions were mostly unknown to Americans. It was then that a commemorative plaque was erected at the Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia to honor the Hmong who fought with the U.S. in the Vietnam War, and veterans began to be recognized for their service and sacrifice.

The CIA’s Secret War still isn’t taught in many schools, though. More recently in 2015, a Secret War memorial was built on the capitol grounds in St. Paul, Minnesota, with an opening ceremony attended by the governor and other politicians.

“Considering they [Hmong] weren’t very far from the Stone Age when they got here, I’d say they’ve made remarkable progress,” says Tim Gordon, a refugee expert for the Minnesota state Department of Human Services. In these couple decades, the Hmong have travelled so far and learned so much that they’ve nearly caught up with the

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28 Associated Press.
rest of the country. The Hmong immigration caused a big culture shock at first, but now the United States, and the Midwest especially, has become so much more diverse. They have built themselves lives around the tragedy of leaving their homes, and they are well on their way to overcoming even the toughest of adversities. The Hmong show that although there are struggles when first immigrating here, they can be conquered and new lives can be made. It should be our hope in America that other minorities that have and will come here will see some of the same successes that the Hmong have, and help to change America for the better.
Appendix A

Maysoua Thao proudly keeps this decorative plate depicting Vang Pao, whom her father served under in the Hmong army during the Vietnam War.

Appendix B

After the Vietnam War was lost, thousands of Hmong flocked to the American planes still in Laos, trying to escape before they have to face the inevitable retaliation of Communist Vietnam. Although Maysoua’s father was a top commander under General Vang Pao, her family did not make it onto a plane. They had to walk through the mountainous jungles, then cross the Mekong River into Thailand.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


This newspaper article is about how the Hmong have settled in and includes some inside looks at the lives of some Hmong refugees. It has points of view from Hmong who do like it here and those who don’t, to give both sides of the story. It explained how the Hmong were doing and how they liked their new homes well.


This is an interview between William Hodge and Chong Neng Xiong. It is the story of Chong, who is a veteran of the Secret War who immigrated to America. It helped shed light on the tragedies that befell Hmong even during the war, and on how the Hmong got involved.

Thao, Maysoua and Emily Norton. Personal Interview at Maysoua’s home. 26 Feb. 2019.

I interviewed a neighbor of mine who is Hmong and asked her about her story of coming to America. It was really cool and although I didn’t learn a lot that was new, it was cool to see all of my research coming to life in her story of her escape and emigration.


Maysoua Thao owned this photo in her home, which I was able to get a picture of, but then I was able to find this copy of it online, where it’s a sharper image.

This interview of only three years ago has the perspectives of many Hmong immigrants on how they’ve been treated here, and it helped me to see their side of the story and help incorporate that into my paper.

**Secondary Sources**


This article is a brief summary of what happened to the Hmong to get them to America. It didn’t contain a lot of extra information and facts, but it was the first article I read and helped me understand what I was researching so that I could narrow down my research questions better.


This article is explaining more in depth how the Vietnam War started and ended. It clarified a lot more what caused it to begin and how it finally ended, and helped with my first research question especially.


In this article, it talked less about how the Hmong fared in America and more about what happened to them in Laos and Thailand after the Vietnam. It describes refugee camps set up in Thailand and how the Hmong who remained in Laos were treated. I’m glad to have learned what was going on on that side of the world while some Hmong were being resettled in America.


This article is focused mainly on how the Hmong have advanced here in America since their immigration. It includes many statistics and facts relating to education which are very helpful.

This article had way more depth to it, and I mostly used the sections ‘Finding a New Home’ and ‘History and Geography’. I learned a lot about how the Hmong were forced to flee Laos and their journey to America.


The Hmong National Development Inc. is a national, non-profit organization that fights in Washington D.C. for Hmong American causes. It contains 2010 census data that helped me have a sense of how many Hmong live here in the US.