

Historical Developments and Changes in Hmong Society: 1850-2012

Yang Sao Xiong, Ph.D.
School of Social Work & Asian American Studies Program
UW-Madison
November 21, 2013

Hmong's story:

- A story of tremendous social, cultural, and psychological changes brought about by powerful political forces;
- A story of the exploitation of underdeveloped countries/nations and relatively powerless ethnic groups by powerful countries;
- A story of human agency, courage, and resiliency in the face of great despair.

Outline of Presentation

- I. Background
 - A. Ethnicity and Ethnic Labels
 - B. Historical Migrations
 - C. Traditional Lifestyle and Social Structure
 - D. The Vietnam War and Post-1975 Migrations
- II. Hmong in the United States
 - A. Initial Contexts of Reception
 - B. Forms of Political Participation

I. Background

A. Ethnicity, Ethnic Label, Ethnic Standing

- Ethnic group: "those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration; this belief must be important for group formation" (Weber 1978:389)
- Hmong adults share the belief that they are a group of people who descended from an ancient female and male ancestor (*ib tug pog yawg*). The mythical first couple: *Niam Laj Sab thiab Txiv Sab Sua*.

From Miao, to Meo, to Lao Soung, to Hmong

- In China, Hmong were and still are lumped into the nationality category of "Miao"—a reference that has been used historically to refer to "a culturally and linguistically diverse category of non-Han peoples" (Diamond 1995:99).
- 1850s – 1980s: Since their migration to Indochina, non-Hmong of that peninsula as well as the French and later, the Americans, called them "Meo", a label Hmong consider to be derogatory.
- 1960s: It was the Pathet Lao nationalists (communists) in Laos who popularized the terms Lao Loum (lowland Lao), Lao Theung (midland Lao), and Lao Soung (highland Lao).

The Hmong prefer to call themselves “Hmong” (*Hmoob*).

- Although the Latinized term “Hmong” first appeared in 1924 with the French Catholic missionary François Savina’s (1924) *Histoire Des Miao*, it was not until the mid-1960s that the same term became used consistently to refer to the ethnic group.
- Yves Bertrais, one of the inventors of the Hmong Roman Popular Alphabets (Hmong RPA), was one of the first to point out that “*les Méos préfèrent s’entendre appeler ‘Hmong’*” (Bertrais and Charrier 1964:77).

Within group differences:

- Regional differences
- Dialect and cultural differences: Hmong Der (‘White Hmong’) and Mong Leng (‘Green Hmong’)
- Gender and generational differences
- Cultural ‘class’ differences: i.e., cultural specialists v. non-cultural specialists; leaders v. followers
- Some social class differences: in terms of wealth, formal education, connections to influential outsiders)

B. Historical Migrations

French Indochina:

- 1847-50: First documented migration of “Meo” (Hmong) into northern Vietnam from China

Area: 96,716 sq. mi.



To Tell the Truth by Jacques Lemoine, Ph.D., *Hmong Studies Journal*, 5: 1-29.



Map of the four main ethnic groups of the Miao Nationality so far as we know

Source: Lemoine, Jacques. 2008. “To Tell the Truth.” *Hmong Studies Journal* 9:1.



Hmong population and political standing in Laos

- According to French colonial records, in **1911**, the population of Hmong and Mien was 15,205 or **two percent** of the 618,500 Laotian population.
- By **1942**, this figure increased to 49,240 or **five percent** of the Laotian population ([Pholsena 2002:178](#)).
- As of **2005**, Hmong constitute **eight percent** of the Laotian population of 5.6 million. This makes Hmong the third largest ethnic group of 49 recognized ethnic groups in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (formerly Laos), after the Khmou (11 percent) and the dominant Lao ethnic group (55 percent) ([Government of Lao PDR 2006](#)).

Very little political power under French colonized Laos

- **1890s-1920s**: Segments of Hmong society were engaged in unsuccessful wars against economically and politically oppressive French colonial authorities. These segments would later join the anti-French struggle in the First Indochina war (Vietnamese v. French).
 - E.g., 1918-1921: Pa Chay's rebellion or "Mad Man's War"
- **1910s – 1940s**, the French authorities created and appointed Hmong clan leaders as middlemen whose primary roles were to extract/collect taxes for the French and oversee the construction of roads.
 - E.g., 1910: Lo Bliá Yao appointed *kaitong*, or chief of canton within Keng Khoai district, northeastern Laos.

C. Traditional Lifestyle and Social Structure



Laos' Physical Environment:

- Laos' tropical monsoon climate: dry in the winters, humid rain in the summers---high humidity and rainfall.
- Hmong lived in small villages in the higher elevations:
 - Cooler air, moderate climates (72 F – 82 F) year round.
 - Low population density: Each village typically had between 4 – 10 houses/households.



Laotian Hmong village

Similarities? Differences?



Malibu, California

The basic lifestyle

- High daily physical activity/exercise
- + high vegetable & fruit consumption
- + moderate weather conditions
- – very little exposure to manmade pollutants, chemicals, etc.
- – traumas of war
- – stresses of urban life
- = a relatively healthy lifestyle

Hmong's Lifestyle: 1850s - 1970s

Slash & burn, self-sufficient farming

Long work hours:

5am – 10pm:

Manual crop planting & harvesting;
Walking to/from garden fields;
Livestock raising;
Hunting or fishing;
Gathering firewood & water;
cooking; attending to children and elderly.



Main crops and diet in Laos

- Mostly ("99%") green vegetables, grains & fruits (mostly steamed or boiled):
 - Mustard greens
 - Hand-harvested rice
 - Cucumbers/bitter melons, watermelons
 - String beans
 - Yams, pumpkins/squashes, etc.
 - Chili peppers
 - Papaya, banana, lychee, rambutan, etc.
 - Bamboo shoots
 - Corn
 - Sugarcanes
- Meat ("1%"):
 - Poultry (chicken, birds, etc.)
 - Small game meat (squirrels, etc.)
 - Fish
 - Pork/beef (very special occasions)
- Low oil, salt, and sugar consumption



Hmong Social Structure

- Social structure: "the set of actually existing relations, at a given moment of time, which link together certain human beings" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940:4).
- The complex social groups and relations within Hmong society; these have implications for collective action:
 - Clan
 - Sub-clan
 - Ritual lineage
 - Family/household
 - Person

Precise kinship terms

Hmong	English
<i>Txiv hlob</i> (older brother of one's father)	Uncle
<i>Txiv ntxawm</i> (younger brother of one's father)	Uncle
<i>Dab laug</i> (brother of one's mother)	Uncle
<i>Yij laug</i> (husband of one's aunt)	Uncle
<i>Niam hlob</i> (the wife of one's father's older brother)	Aunt
<i>Niam ntxawm</i> (the wife of one's father's younger brother)	Aunt
<i>Niam dab laug</i> (the wife of one's mother's brother)	Aunt
<i>Phauj</i> (one's aunt)	Aunt

Clan Segment

Shown in diagram:

- 1 Sub-clan
- 4 Lineages (A, B, C, D)

The General Form of a Clan Segment

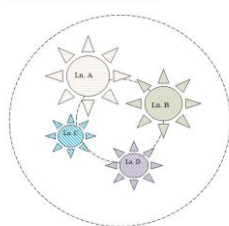
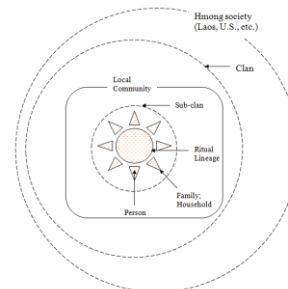
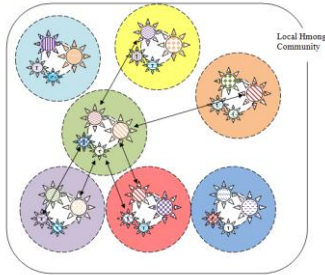


Figure 1: The General Form of the Hmong Social Structure



Source: Xiong, Yang Sao. 2013. Hmong Americans' Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.

Figure 2: Visual Representation of a Hmong American Community



How many Hmong clans are there?

- 11 to 21 clans, depending on the source of information.
- Up to 32 total clan surnames -- compiled by anthropologist Kaoly Yang (2004).

12 major clans (and their English equivalent terms) include

- *Ham* (**Hang**),
- *Hawj* (**Her** or **Herr**),
- *Kwm* (**Kue**),
- *Lauj* (**Lao**, **Lo**, or **Lor**),
- *Lis* (**Ly** or **Lee**),
- *Muas* (**Moua**),
- *Tsab* (**Cha**),
- *Thoj* (**Thao** or **Thor**),
- *Vaj* (**Va** or **Vang**),
- *Vwj* (**Vue** or **Vu**),
- *Xyooj* (**Xiong**), and
- *Yaj* (**Yang** or **Ya**).

Political organization:

Traditionally, collective decisions were and, to some extent, still are made at the level of the lineage instead of the clan:

- 1) *Tus koj dab koj qhua* or Leader in charge of religious rituals
- 2) *Tus koj tshoob koj kos* or Leader in charge of marriage rituals
- 3) *Tus koj plaub koj ntug* or Leader in charge of legal/conflict matters

Fairly recent phenomena:

- Clan leaders (in some provinces in Laos): established during the French colonial period (early 1920s to 1940s).
- Clan leaders: re-established in Thailand refugee camps in the early 1980s.
- 18 Clan Council: formed in the United States.
 - Still struggles to gain legitimate authority

D. The Vietnam War and Post-1975 Migrations



- 1946-1954: The First Indochina War (France v. Viet Minh)
 - Segments of Hmong society were on both sides of the war
- 1954-1975: The Second Indochina War (U.S. v. North Vietnam); **Secret War** began in 1961.
 - Segments of Laotian Hmong society were on both sides of the war; 'independent' or neutral segments harmed by both sides.

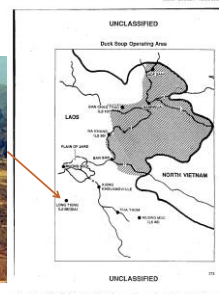
1960s - 1975: The U.S. CIA's Secret Army in Laos: Hmong men

- Late 1959: U.S. CIA paramilitary specialist James W. (Bill) Lair met with the late-General Vang Pao.
 - ~ 30,000 Hmong men (young boys to elderly men) drafted/recruited into the secret army.
 - "In January 1961, Air America delivered weapons to the first 300 [Hmong] trainees" (Leary 1999).
- Why did U.S. recruit the Hmong?
 - Removed from the center of Laotian power;
 - Did not necessarily get along/side with the dominant Lao;
 - Could be controlled and commanded by U.S.

Why did the U.S. keep it secret?

- The war in Laos was a "Secret War" because the U.S. (and other countries') involvement in Laos violated the Geneva Accords of 1962 (Geneva, Switzerland), which pledged to respect Laos' neutrality and to refrain from establishing military bases in Laos.
- 13 countries and Laos agreed: the 1) United States, 2) the Soviet Union, 3) the United Kingdom, 4) the People's Republic of China, 5) France, 6) India, 7) Poland, 8) Thailand, 9) the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), 10) the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam), 11) Burma, 12) Cambodia, and 13) Canada.

America's Secret Army was headquartered in Long Tieng. Operated by "Air America".




Anti-War protests in the U.S.

- 1964 onward (coincided with the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.): Organized opposition to the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War due in large part to the draft (or draft lottery), which threatened working-class as well as middle-class American men and their families.
 - Discrimination against low-education, low-income, underprivileged members of society;
 - Unjustified violence against Vietnamese people, who were seeking independence.
 - American involvement seen as unnecessary, immoral, etc.





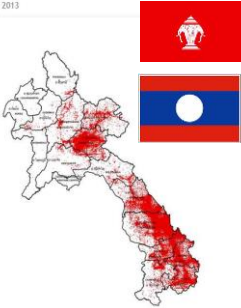
- **1973:** Paris Peace Accords of 1973 signed; U.S. pulled out of Laos, leaving Hmong to fight the war against the Pathet Lao.
- **1975:** the South Vietnamese government fell. In May 1975, Gen. Vang Pao evacuated himself from Long Tieng, Laos to Thailand. Tens of thousands of Hmong left behind; most trekked 100-200 miles to Thailand. Thousands drowned in the Mekong River.



LAOS, The Most Bombed Country in the World

SEPTEMBER 11, 2013
by Dev

"As part of its efforts during the Vietnam War, the United States began a nine-year bombing campaign in Laos in 1964 that ultimately dropped 260 million cluster bombs on the country -- the most heavily bombed country in history. That's more than 2.5 million tons of munitions -- more than what the U.S. dropped in World War II on Germany and Japan combined" (U.S. Representative Mike Honda, *The Huffington Post*, April 30, 2010).




War: Death, Destruction, Displacement

- **1960 – 1975: Secret War in Laos**
 - Frequent physical and psychological trauma;
 - Exposure to cigarettes (among soldiers);
 - Exposure to various chemicals and diseases.
- **1960s – 1970s:** 10% of Hmong population in Laos died in war (10% of U.S. population = 31 million Americans.)
- **After 1975:** Close to 3 million people became refugees outside of their former homelands (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos). About 1.4 million would eventually be resettled in the United States.

- **1975 – late 1990s:** Over 200,000 Laotian refugees made it across the Mekong River to Thailand
- **1980s – 2000s:** Forced repatriation of refugees



Stateless refugees in Thailand

- Thailand hosted about 1.3 million Southeast Asian refugees. About 228,000 were Laotian refugees, including at least 100,000 Hmong refugees.
- Many Laotian refugees, including Hmong, stayed in refugee camps for years or over a decade before being admitted to the U.S.

My family

- Lived in Thailand refugee camps: 1975-1987 (12 years)

Ban Vinai (<1 sq. mi): very high population density: 45,000 - 50,000 refugees altogether



1976 - 1990: Hmong's Migration to Resettlement Countries

- 1) France (admitted 10,000 Hmong), including 1,400 who went to French Guyana
- 2) Canada (900)
- 3) Australia (360)
- 4) China (260)
- 5) Argentina (250)
- 6) The U.S (approx. 100,000).....

Source: Michaud, Jean. 2004. "Hmong." Pp. 597-598 in *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, edited by Keat Gin Ooi., Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc.

Immigration to the U.S., 1976-2006

Virtually all Indochinese refugees were admitted to the U.S. under the *Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975* or the *Refugee Act of 1980*:

Immigrant v. Refugee defined...

- An **immigrant** is “any person not a citizen or national of the United States” except for those legally admitted under specific non-immigrant categories or status (e.g., diplomats).
- A **refugee** is “any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality” and “who is unable or unwilling to return to...that country...because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (Immigration and Nationality Act §101(a)(42)(A).)

‘Waves’ of refugees

- 1976 – 1979: First major wave of Hmong refugees arrived in the U.S.
- 1980 – 1983: Second major wave of Hmong refugees to the U.S.
- 1987 – 1995: Third major wave of Hmong refugees to the U.S.
- 2004 – 2006: Most recent, probably last wave of 15K Hmong refugees from Thailand.

II. Hmong Americans in the United States

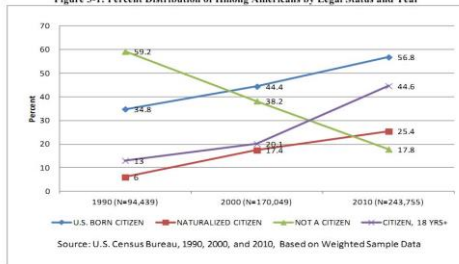


Hmong Population in the U.S.

- U.S. Census 1990: 94,439
- U.S. Census 2000: 169,428 (80% increase from 1990)
- U.S. Census 2010: 247,596 (46% increase from 2000)
- Concentrated in four states: California (91,224), Minnesota (66,181), **Wisconsin (49,240)**, and North Carolina (10,864).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 3-1: Percent Distribution of Hmong Americans by Legal Status and Year



Source: Xiong, Yang Sio. 2013. Hmong Americans' Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.

Hmong in Select Wisconsin Cities

- Milwaukee: 10,245
- Wausau: 3,783
- Sheboygan: 3,716
- Appleton: 3,156
- Green Bay: 3,020
- Madison: 2,728 Madison Metro: 4,230
- La Crosse: 1,563
- Oshkosh: 1,469

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2010

Within-Group Differences

- Year of arrival; place of arrival and resettlement;
- Generational cohort differences (1st, 1.5, 2nd gen.);
- Regional differences (Midwest v. West U.S.);
 - Hmong are the largest Asian Am. groups in WI & MN
- English ability; heritage language ability;
- Educational attainment; income; occupation; etc.
- Differences in religious beliefs and affiliation
 - Traditional Hmong religion, various denominations/forms of Christianity, Buddhism, etc.;
- “Mixed-race” background, self-identification, etc.

Initial Contexts of Reception

- No existing ethnic communities—lack of social support from co-ethnics
- Social isolation made worst by U.S. government’s deliberate policy of dispersing Southeast Asian refugees across states and cities;
- Racial prejudice or violence from established residents;
- Bifurcated labor market/joblessness.

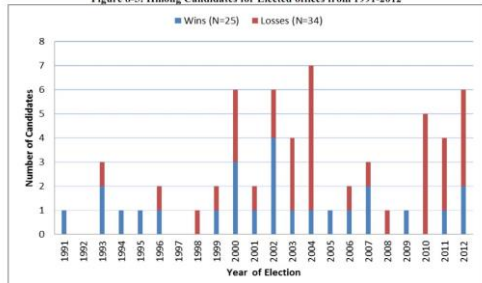
- Contexts of reception shape immigrant groups’ access to financial and political resources.
 - Social movement actors need a lot of things but especially financial and political resources .

Forms of Political Participation

- Electoral Political Activities or ‘formal politics’
 - Naturalizing, registering, voting, running for elected offices, contributing to campaigns, etc.
- Non-Electoral Political Activities
 - Participation in organized protests (demonstrations, rallies, strikes, etc.)
 - Participation in churches, ethnic organizations, etc.



Figure 8-5: Hmong Candidates for Elected offices from 1991-2012

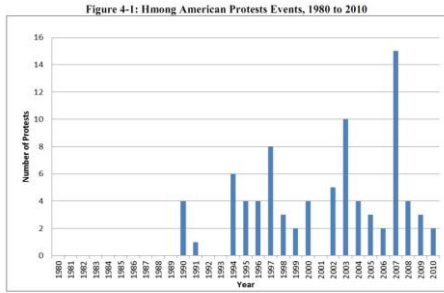


Source: Xiong, Yang Sao. 2013. Hmong Americans’ Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.

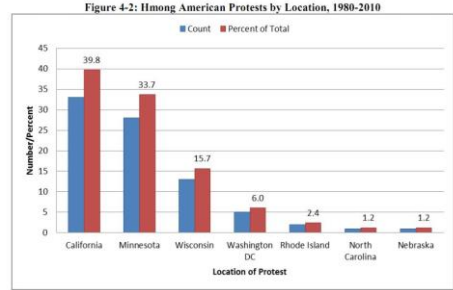
Table 8-6: Hmong American Candidates for Primary Elected Offices by State, 1991-2012

	Wisconsin		Minnesota		California		Nebraska		All 4 States	
	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses	Wins	Losses
U.S. House of Rep.	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
State Senate	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	2	4
State House/Assembly	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	5
District Court Judge	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
County Board Supervisor	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Republican Central Committee	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
City Mayor	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
City Council Member	5	3	1	7	2	2	1	1	9	13
School Board Member	3	3	5	1	3	2	0	0	11	6
Column Total	10	11	9	15	5	7	1	1	25	34

Source: Xiong, Yang Sao. 2013. Hmong Americans’ Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.



Source: Xiong, Yang Sao. 2013. Hmong Americans' Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.



Source: Xiong, Yang Sao. 2013. Hmong Americans' Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012. PhD Dissertation, Department of Sociology, UCLA.

Questions?

Works Cited

- Bertrais, Yves and René Charrier. 1964. *Dictionnaire Hmong (Mô Blanc)-Français*. Vientiane, Laos: Mission catholique; distribué par The Collar Book Shop, Detroit.
- Diamond, Norma. 1995. "Defining the Miao." Pp. 92-116 in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, edited by S. Harrell. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Government of Lao PDR. 2006. Results from the Population and Housing Census 2005. Vientiane: Steering Committee for Census of Population and Housing.
- Leary, William M. 1999. "CIA Air Operations in Laos, 1955-1974: Supporting the 'Secret War.'" in *Studies in Intelligence*. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency- Center for the Study of Intelligence.
- Lemoine, Jacques. 2008. "To Tell the Truth." *Hmong Studies Journal* 9:1.
- Michaud, Jean. 2004. "Hmong." Pp. 597-598 in *Southeast Asia: A Historical Encyclopedia, from Angkor Wat to East Timor*, edited by Keat Gin Ooi., Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc.
- Pholsena, Vatthana. 2002. "Nation/Representation: Ethnic Classification and Mapping Nationhood in Contemporary Laos." *Asian Ethnicity* 3(2):175-197.
- Savina, François Marie. 1924. *Histoire Des Miao*. Hong Kong. Impr. de la Société des missions-étrangères.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Edited by G. Roth and C. Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Yang, Kaoly. 2004. "Problems in the Interpretation of Hmong Clan Surnames." Pp. 179-215 in *Hmong-Miao in Asia*, edited by N. Tapp, J. Michaud, C. Culas, and G. Y. Lee. Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silksworm Books.

Note: The charts, figures, and tables on Hmong's social structure and their political participation come from Yang Sao Xiong's PhD dissertation, Hmong Americans' Protest Movements and Political Incorporation in the U.S., 1980-2012, (Department of Sociology, UCLA, 2013).