

ACROSS THE OCEAN:
THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ON HMONG WOMEN

by
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ABSTRACT

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Hmong women originally from Laos and Thailand are in constant transition due to their journey to America. They have been strong, often quiet, contributors to their families and people, and their strength continues despite the adversities of war and immigration.

This researcher used a qualitative approach in seeking to understand the transitions of Hmong women's lives in the United States. This phenomenological study was based on interviews with four Hmong women who spoke about the life changes they have faced due to immigration. Interviews were mainly derived from a snowball sample where the participants were friends or relatives of the researcher. Participants who were not immediately connected to the researcher were selected by recommendation of existing participants. The research question was: how has immigration into the United States changed Hmong Women's lives within their families and culture?

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I want to thank staff and faculty in the MFT program for encouraging and challenging me to grow as a professional by sharing their experience and wisdom. There have been wonderful moments as well as moments of growing pains but, I have found a stronger faith in my abilities because of it.

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Last but definitely not least, Br. you are love in its purest form. You are the calm in my waves, so that I may always find my way back to shore. Ad Infinitum.

Dedication

Dedicated to my mother and all the Hmong women what have suffered and have persevered through great adversities so that their daughters could be seen as equals. Your sacrifices will forever define and shape my journey.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Hmong, like other refugees resettled to a new location, reconstructed their already understood social worlds, and overcame imperfections in this process, by substitution and overlooking differences. In general, Hmong refugees did not seek new lives, they sought the same lives in a new location, and where possible they used their new opportunities to bolster preexisting social conceptions (Donnelly, 1994).

However, despite their efforts for cultural and social preservation, refugee Hmong American families are undergoing countless transitions from the lifestyles they had in Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. Their agrarian lifestyle has changed to accommodate a new way of life in America. Hmong women have traditionally been the caretakers and nurturers of their family members. In their previous way of life, young Hmong girls were taught the responsibilities of attending to the demands of their families, and Hmong mothers were usually responsible for teaching their daughters to fulfill traditional obligations and functions as part of a family unit. Young Hmong women were expected to care for their immediate family members until marriage, when they began to care for their husband's families. It was assumed that Hmong daughters-in-law would love, care, and nurture their in-laws in ways that were equal to the love, care, and nurture offered to their parents' families.

Donnelly (1994) states that the key to understanding gender attitudes among first-generation Hmong refugees is found in their universal insistence that they remain Hmong as long as they can maintain a certain set of social relationships within the household – an insistence on continuity, on nonchanging social structure. These particular social forms can be identified not by the actual content or goals of actions, but by the lines of respect and authority they embody. Such social forms place each person in two hierarchies: gender and age.

Hmong women redefining their roles within their culture and families is characteristic of the numerous transitions facing the Hmong people. The Hmong culture must inevitably face such transitions as its people struggle to assimilate into mainstream America. It is important and beneficial for the Hmong and mainstream culture to understand the existing intercultural friction that is present when people of a subculture struggle to assimilate, as well as to maintain their identities.

The acknowledgement that Hmong women have received falls short in comparison to their strengths and contributions. There is limited research devoted specifically to Hmong women and to the historical transitions that they have endured since coming to the United States. Research has generally been focused on the Hmong people, men, or culture. Hmong women may have been included in such studies but seldom have been the focus of them. The researcher's goal was to devote a study to understanding and learning about Hmong women's lives from their perspectives, using data derived from direct interviews with Hmong women.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The fundamental basis of the Hmong culture is founded on respect and traditional values. From generation to generation, Hmong mothers have taught their daughters to respect their parents and elders, to serve them, to listen to them, to not talk back, to do what they are told, to stay home, and to do the daily chores. Traditional Hmong daughters learned to respect their parents by accomplishing physical tasks and staying mute (Vang, 1994). Women are the caretakers, responsible for supervision the children and home. Wives [mothers] raise their daughters to become caretakers of the home. Most often girls are parentified to help parents with siblings (Vue, 2000).

Hmong women earned the approval of others when they follow the rules of the community; they earn disapproval when they deviated. This method of behavior control, ascribing high social value to “reputation” and “being good,” was effective since it was reinforced by peers and family members as well as the larger community (Reavill, 1996). Traditional gender roles were challenged as the Vietnam War brought change and relocation. After the war, Hmong people were forced to flee from their homelands in Laos to refugee camps in Thailand, and while there, many waited until they could journey to a different country and gain political asylum. For many Hmong refugees in the United States, immigration had given Hmong women new opportunities for education and employment, the influence of which had given Hmong women knowledge and power to greatly redefine their roles within their families and culture.

Education

In Laos and Vietnam, the Hmong people lived in intimate villages, which were mainly composed of friends and extended family members. The stories and traditions of these people were passed on orally from one generation to the next. Historically, the Hmong people did not have a written language until the mid-twentieth century when French missionaries came into their villages. The invention of a Hmong written language allowed them to document their history, traditions, and cultural values.

Due to cultural, social, and economic reasons, girls traditionally were not sent to school. It was believed a girl's education would not benefit the family (Vang, 1994). When living in Laos, the expense of education allowed few Hmong boys, and rarely girls, to receive formal education, as the value of education increased because of scarcity (Dirks, 1999). However, in certain villages, accessible to the Thai Department of Education, young children, around six years of age, were able to attend school and obtain a basic education. These children were taught the Thai language (spoken and written), mathematics, and social studies (Symonds, 1991).

Education [in America] plays a major role in the shaping of culture. Conflicting messages about gender roles, and the lack of female role models, posed challenges for the education of women. Hmong women struggled with striking a balance “between resistance and accommodation to conformity at school and at home.” Reavill (1996) stated that Hmong girls and boys in the high school received different feedback from their home communities. With boys, parents worried whether they were exerting sufficient effort in their schoolwork. However, with girls, parents worried about school being a dangerous place where the girls were at risk of elopement or pregnancy. Boys were explicitly encouraged to continue their schooling in order to better fulfill their adult role of supporting a family. Girls received support when they left school

to pursue a domestic role (Reavill, 1996). Girls especially were limited in their extra curricular activities and often assisted in child care and household chores (Dirks, 1999).

According to Lee (1997), Hmong parents encourage both their sons and daughters to work hard in school in order to achieve economic security; however, despite their belief in the instrumental purposes of education, Hmong parents continue to hold higher expectations for their sons than for their daughters. Girls heard a mixed message in their parents' boasting to others about their academic accomplishments. They saw this boasting as encouraging them to continue their education but also as a strategy for making the daughter more marriageable (Reavill, 1996).

Reavill (1996) describes conflicts between family and academic demands as symptomatic of the absence of the family's experience with and understanding of the academic demands of college. Families have little experience with and exposure to education in general, and higher education in particular. College is seen as a good thing, but what happens at college is not understood. Going to college and graduating are the recognized markers; what happens in between is not clear. Familial demands and lack of understanding regarding college-level academic work, combine with perceptions about academic difficulties, often reflected women's ability to succeed in education (Reavill, 1996).

The mode of learning in college is different from that experienced by those that grew up in Laos. Women who spent their childhoods in Laos and Thailand, even if they attended some school, for the most part learned by observing their elders. Therefore, learning in Laos was more concrete and more visible to others. It had immediate and practical value. Girls learned to cook, grow food, sew, or build a house. As a result, some [traditional] Hmong women may have been uncomfortable with the more privileged and abstract kinds of knowledge required in U.S. higher education (Reavill, 1996).

The most important traditional virtue for Hmong women is to be a hard worker, and potential failure in academic endeavors calls a woman's worth into question. Compounding this is the perception of families that academic work is not really hard work. Hard work, in the estimation of women's families, is physical labor. The seemingly passive, non-strenuous nature of academic work makes it appear effortless. The hard work of college, that is studying and thinking, is invisible, and therefore, not considered difficult. If a woman fails at this relatively "easy task" of studying and thinking, which is not physically demanding, her worth as a worker is truly questioned (Reavill, 1996).

There are various reasons that Hmong women pursue an education. In Reavill's (1996) study, all the women described their decision to attend college as taking advantage of a valuable opportunity. These women and their families saw education as the most significant benefit of the move to the U.S.; not taking advantage of the opportunity to be educated would be foolish. Hmong women wanted to avoid the undesirable situation of their mothers [being traditionally dependent on men] and saw education as a path to an alternative. Such women and their families identified a college degree as the way to get a better job with higher pay and as the gateway to the American dream of prosperity. They described their decision to attend college as a valuable opportunity, seeing the potential future economic contributions the women could make to the family and wanting some insurance against the economic impact of losing a mate.

According to Lee (1997), Hmong women maintain that one of the primary reasons they pursued higher education was to achieve social mobility and financial security. They considered access to free public education and the opportunities associated with education to be among the greatest advantages of life in the United States. In addition to a belief in the link between education and economic security, all of the women spoke about the link between education and

freedom from male domination. Their talk centered around the idea that education leads to independence and self-empowerment. They believed that through education they would be able to achieve gender equality within their families in ways that their mothers and grandmothers did not have. The women reasoned that college degrees would lead them to good jobs, which in turn will make them equal economic partners in their marriages. They also believed that the process of education would empower them to speak up for their own interests. The women's desire for economic security, personal independence, and gender equality motivated them to pursue college educations. Their actions and desires are changing not only their own lives; they have also begun to alter the Hmong culture.

Work

In Laos and Vietnam, part of a Hmong woman's value was centered on her ability to care for her immediate family and then, for her husband's family. Success for Hmong women was often defined through the happiness and health of their husbands and children. During most of a Hmong woman's life, she was taught the necessary skills for operating the family's land, maintaining the livestock, and caring for her family members. The Hmong people were farmers who depended heavily on the land for their survival and prosperity, which made the woman's role even more indispensable to the family's future.

In addition to Hmong women's daily responsibilities of maintaining their families, they also created and contributed material goods. Donnelly (1994) states that traditionally, all thread, cloth, and finished textiles produced at home were manufactured by women; men did not sew. Learning needlework was part of a larger range of connections between women. It was an activity that made attachments between them easier. Doing needlework together stood as a symbol of connectedness, a way of expressing social relationships.

Female-produced thread, clothing, and fabrics used in rituals or given in ritual exchanges symbolized the cohesion of the male-dominated Hmong household, descent line, and (ultimately) society, with textile exchanges occurring within and between male-headed clans (Donnelly, 1994). In textile work, then, there were separate gendered divisions of labor, in which men gave women raw materials (tools, time, fibers, and floss), women gave men finished products (thread, clothing, ritual pieces), and men and women both made statements about kinship relationships with these woman-produced things (Donnelly, 1994).

Gendered divisions of labor were meant to support and sustain patriarchal households, as men typically controlled and dictated the family's survival. Traditionally men and boys had access to choice, training, and experience in decision-making, but women and girls did not. Thus, men constituted the economic core of the household, and the unit of decision was actually the household, not the individual. All family members were expected to submit to what was perceived as the overall welfare of the group; what that welfare was, was decided by the men (Donnelly, 1994).

Reavill (1996) explains that the transference of the traditional gendered division of labor from Laos to the U.S. assigned Hmong women work within the home. American economic realities made it difficult for Hmong women to contribute to the family's welfare through work in the home to the same extent that they contributed in Laos. This was the first time that many of the Hmong people had participated in a capitalist wage-labor economy in which domestic labor is both separate from and subordinated to the labor needed for subsistence. The resulting tension seems to gradually be leading to changes in gender roles (Reavill, 1996).

Marriage

For the traditional Hmong female, marriage took her from her father's home, in order for her to become property of her husband's family (Dirks, 1999). Once married, a Hmong woman's job consisted of cooking, cleaning the house, taking care of the children, tending livestock, weaving textiles, making clothes, and most importantly, obeying and respecting her husband. Her role, which was all important to the family system, required that she be subservient to the male and function basically for the benefit of the family and clan. Not only did she bear children and run the household, but she also worked in the fields and accepted her roles without question. She had little or no say in official clan business, religious and spiritual functions, or cultural activities (Vang, 1994). Marrying was called "becoming a daughter-in-law" because the new wife was almost certain to live with her in-laws and work under orders from her mother-in-law (Donnelly, 1994).

Traditional Hmong marriages are authoritative; the man and clan elders had virtually complete control and decision-making privileges regarding marriage arrangements and the bride. In Laos and Thailand, there were numerous ways in which a young couple could be married. The following are only a few examples: one, they voluntarily choose to be with each other; two, the elders would set up arranged marriages between two people from different clans; three, the man would approach the woman's parents and ask permission to marry their daughter, offering money and gifts in return [usually this type of marriage occurred only if the man was from a wealthy family]; or four, the man would kidnap and/or rape a woman and claim her as his wife. According to Donnelly (1994), in Laos, getting married for the first time generally involved courting, choosing a mate, and an elopement (called catch-hand marriage) with the girl staying at the boy's house for three days; or alternatively, the boy making a formal request to the girl's

family, raising the bride wealth [price], contract negotiations between families and payment of bride wealth, and formal conveyance of the bride to her husband's home.

The wife-receiving group (groom's clan) was required to provide bride wealth to the wife-giving group (bride's clan) in exchange for other services such as sexual rights, and the reproductive potential of the woman. The payment of bride wealth tied a woman to her husband and his lineage for all her lifetime. All rights to her labor, sexuality, and reproduction were transferred from her natal family to her husband's. Divorce was rare, although it was possible. If divorce occurred, and it was almost always assumed the woman was the problem, she had to leave her children with her husband's family. Bridewealth constituted social insurance for a bride, since it could not be demanded back from her parents, if she was abandoned or wrongs were committed against her (Symonds, 1991).

Vue (2000) states that the underlying reason the Hmong population practice bride pricing is to assure that the marriage will be forever. The practice may have mixed implications, as some women feel it insures their value, yet other women dislike being perceived as property to be owned by their husbands. The custom of bride pricing may cause feelings of hopelessness in that women have no choice regarding what happens in their lives (Vue, 2000).

The traditional practices of Hmong courtship and marriage have undergone numerous changes due to American laws. Marriages that stem out of a man kidnapping and raping a young woman are now illegal and less practiced. Arranged marriages are also less frequently practiced because Americanized Hmong men and women have refused to let elders choose their life partners for them. Marriages in which a man asks the young woman's parents to marry their daughter is sometimes still practiced, but most Hmong families are unable to afford this approach. The most common type of marriage is when two young people voluntarily choose to

do so. American laws on rape, bigamy, and divorce have negated the earlier assumption that ultimately male power over females [in marriage arrangements] is always valid (Donnelly, 1994).

Julian (1998) states that contemporary research indicates that the majority of first-generation Hmong in the west were married between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. In the U.S., although adolescence, a time between childhood and adulthood, has gradually entered into Hmong families' conception of life, there remains pressure for girls to marry early (Reavill, 1996). Hmong men's claims that young brides are "traditional" [obedient, subservient, respectful etc.] can be viewed as an attempt to reclaim male power and authority [in the family system] (Julian, 1998). Reavill's (1996) study indicates in the traditional Hmong culture, marriage is linked with family structure [continuing the man's family lineage]. Marriage marked the entry into adulthood and took place shortly after puberty. Not only do families expect daughters to marry but the girls themselves are inculcated with this belief.

The Wife and Mother

Fertility defines a Hmong woman from birth. Traditionally, when a child was born in a Hmong family, the first inquiry was about its genitalia. If it was a girl, her placenta was buried under the bed of her parents where she was conceived. The placenta was buried under the bed, so the girl would grow up to have many children. When a Hmong woman gives birth to a child, she is happy because children are highly valued [influenced by the traditional significance of child bearing]. Without them, neither woman nor men are considered complete (Symonds, 1991).

Part of a Hmong woman's value is centered on her ability to care for her immediate family and, then, for her husband's family. For example, Hmong women are frequently spoken

of in terms of an obedient daughter-in-law, a hardworking daughter, or a loving wife (Vang, 1994). Ultimately each woman works under the command of the men of her own household – under her husband if married, under her father and brothers if unmarried, or under her son if aged (Donnelly, 1994).

Based on traditional Hmong cultural norms, the wife had little say in her marriage. A good wife was one who is submissive, patient, and tries to meet all the needs of her husband and his family members. Parents and clan leaders had authority on the bride's and groom's marriage matters. The rights and duties of the wife and husband were to maintain their marriage for a lifetime. The wife was obligated to submit to and obey her husband. The husband had the right to socially go out under some reasonable circumstances, but the wife had no legal right to go out for social activities without the husband's permission (Vue, 2000).

Hmong women were taught to be inferior, keep a good reputation, be a good wife, stay home, and do the chores. They had very little say about anything, especially decision-making. A wife's role was to show unquestioning obedience, first of all to her mother-in-law, secondly to her own husband, and thirdly to her father-in-law (Vang, 1994). Very few women undermine the authority of males in front of others due to the following reasons: (1) women want to be thought of as good daughters and wives, which brings them respect and respect to their parents or husbands and (2) because disciplinary action, a means of social control, would be used (Symonds, 1991).

Chapter Three

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

The researcher initially started her study with certain assumptions that belong to the phenomenological paradigm, believing that the phenomenon of interest should be studied where it naturally exists and from the person's own perspective (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). She believed that significant issues, themes, or points of interest would naturally emerge through the process of collecting and analyzing data. Data collection in a phenomenological inquiry uses any means of collecting information that might allow the researcher access to the experience of another (Boss et al., 1996).

The researcher chose to conduct interviews as a means of using the participants' voices to best illustrate their perspectives and experiences. Phenomenological methods of data collection must allow the participants to define their phenomena for themselves and to describe the conditions, values, and attitudes they believe are relevant in defining their lives (Boss et al., 1996). The participants were given the opportunity to teach the researcher what they deemed was important in understanding their life stories. Bias is inherent in all research; regardless of the method used (Boss et al., 1996). The researcher acknowledges her personal beliefs and values, and she understands how research interpretations are shaped by personal biases. For example, the researcher may be likely to select themes or draw conclusions that reflect her personal perspective. The researcher's task of exploring and understanding the participants' stories requires the ability to listen, clarify, probe, expand, and focus.

Description of Participants

The researcher derived data through direct interviews with only four Hmong women due to limited time and funds, these four research participants were chosen through a snowball selection of convenience. Two participants are acquaintances and the other two participants are related to the researcher. Participant descriptions are as follows: Mao is a 21 year old college student, mother of two children, and was married at age fifteen. Xue is a 20 year old college student, unmarried, and the oldest child in her family. Zong is a 50 year old mother of four children, who married at age 18. Nou is a 19 year old college student, unmarried, and the second oldest child in her family.

Data Collection

All participants agreed to meet the researcher for personal interviews, which lasted from one to one and half-hours long. Each participant was asked to respond freely to all applicable questions, generated by the researcher. The research question for this study was: how has immigration into the United States changed Hmong women's lives within their families and culture? In an attempt to answer the research question, all participants were asked the following: 1) What was your life like in Laos before the Vietnam War? 2) What was your life like during the Vietnam War? and 3) What is your life like now, after coming to America? With permission from each participant, the researcher audiotaped and transcribed all interviews.

Interviews and Transcribing

After transcribing all interviews, the researcher looked for emerging patterns or themes regarding education, work, marriage, and motherhood. These themes were identified through reading available studies and articles on Hmong women, as referenced in the literature review section. According to phenomenological beliefs, the researcher wanted to accurately represent

her participants' personal values, attitudes, and conditions. Thus, in presenting the research findings, the researcher used direct quotes from the participants. Research findings were an integration of experiences from the participants.

Researcher's Personal Process

Similar to the participants in this study, the researcher is also a Hmong woman who is in a state of transition due to her journey from Thailand to America. She too has seen changes in the Hmong woman's role due to cultural assimilation. The researcher is constantly negotiating and defining her identity in the realms of traditional Hmong expectations and American opportunities. The themes in this study have not only reflected the lives of her participants, but her life as well. Therefore, she has chosen to use the voices of other Hmong women, as well as her own perspective, to give as accurate as possible an illustration of Hmong women's lives in transition.

Data Analysis

In an attempt to increase validity, the researcher used participant quotes to closely represent their perspectives and experiences. The use of direct quotes was intended to provide context-rich [thick] and meaningful descriptions of the issues being discussed. "Thick descriptions" were provided, so the reader could assess the potential transferability and appropriateness of the presented findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher tried to demonstrate congruency and connectedness between participant experiences, other literature, and her personal knowledge, by synthesizing all these sources into the findings section.

Interpreting the phenomena of everyday life experiences requires insight, the ability to make connections between concepts, and the ability to notice both what is and is not present (Boss et al., 1996). The researcher believes that developing these insights is a progressive, life

long task. Because insights were being developed during the course of this study, misinterpretations may potentially have occurred, despite the great lengths that the researcher took to avoid them.

Ethical Consideration

It was the researcher's ethical responsibility to obtain informed consent, maintain confidentiality, and inform participants of the risk-benefits involved when participating in this study. To ensure that ethical standards were met the researcher took the following steps: clearly explaining to participants their right to withdraw from the project, to end the interview, and to decline any recordings. The researcher is responsible to protect the privacy of the participants and not expose any identifying information without the participants' written consent, as personal information could potentially be disclosed during interviews. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. This protects the participants from any public judgment or discomfort due to being in the study.

The researcher thoroughly explained the purpose of the research, and identified the possible research benefits of allowing outsiders to learn about the struggles of Hmong women's lives through the participants' insights and personal stories. It was important that the researcher helped identify any potential risks involved, such as the participants' feelings of vulnerability or self-exposure. Most of all, it was imperative that the researcher had the highest respect for all involved participants.

Strengths

The many strengths in this phenomenological study are as follows. The researcher accepts and acknowledges her subjectivity. She is willing to admit that her definitions and perceptions of reality shaped the research questions and influenced her interpretations of this

study. The researcher recognizes that knowledge is relative and illusive. She believes that people's interpretation of their life experiences is valid and important. The phenomenological approach assumes everyday knowledge is shared and held by researcher and participant alike (Boss et al., 1996). Thus, the researcher and the participants cooperatively interpreted the phenomenon of interest. There is no hierarchy of expert opinions or realities. Phenomenology research seeks to increase sensitivity to the experiences of others (Boss et al., 1996).

Limitations

Aside from the many strengths of this study, there are also the following limitations. The sample size in this pilot study is small and is not representative of the larger population of Hmong women globally, or even of the Hmong women in America. There are many Hmong refugee women that did not come to America after the Vietnam War and are currently residing in other countries; therefore, they do not share the same experiences as Hmong American refugee women. The researcher suggests that this study's emerging themes regarding education, work, marriage, and motherhood be examined with a larger sample size, perhaps with a sample varying in age, marital status, education, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This study was restricted due to funding and time limitations; thus, the researcher wonders if similar themes would emerge in a study that included different times of immigration and varying levels of assimilation into the mainstream culture.

Even though the researcher admits personal subjectivity in interpreting the data, there is no guarantee that such biases will be eliminated. One may say that this is due to the lack of a precise structure in which information is gathered from the participants and interpreted by the researcher. With the acknowledgement that truth and reality are subjective, there may not be a concrete or universal declaration of the experiences endured by Hmong refugee women.

Finally, the researcher encourages the reader to assess her presented research findings and see if they are accurate in regards to his or her personal experiences with the Hmong culture. The researcher tried to most accurately portray the lives of her participants' and offer an unbiased point of view. However, she acknowledges that her personal journey as a Hmong American woman has helped her in the process of identifying and structuring this study.

Chapter Four

Findings

Through the interviewing process, the researcher has learned that it is very difficult, perhaps unrealistic, to compartmentalize or categorize various aspects of the participants' lives, as they are all interconnected. For example, one cannot simply look at education in Hmong women's lives without considering its implications regarding gender roles within marriage and motherhood. All points of interest such as education, work, marriage, and motherhood have contributed to each participant's personal experience and identity. At the same time, the researcher was faced with the decision of how to organize the findings in a manageable research format. Therefore, she decided to group participant experiences and examples into the general themes of education, work, marriage, and motherhood. The researcher selected these themes through reading available literature and identifying direct references in participant stories. For example, when a participant discussed her responsibilities with caring for her husband and children, the researcher would group the participant's illustration in the wife and mother section.

Where there were inconsistencies between research findings, literature findings, and/or the researcher's personal experience, the researcher openly acknowledged them in a compare-and-contrast format. As presented in the research findings, the researcher found that other women's accounts of their life experience were convincing and seemed to "ring true" as she compared them to her personal experience of being a Hmong woman in America.

The researcher has faced similar cultural demands and obstacles as her participants, as they strive for independence, survival, and acceptance in the American and Hmong cultures. Mao, the college student, mother, and wife, struggles with balancing cultural expectations and personal aspirations. Submitting to her husband and cultural expectations, she became married at age fifteen and now has two young children. Mao is currently raising a family and attending

college. Similar to Mao, Xue is also a college student trying to balance cultural and personal expectations. Xue has decided to put off marriage and pursue her education. She is the oldest child in her family and is obligated to meet her parents' requirements to be a good role model for her younger siblings. A college student and unmarried, Xue's position is like Nou's. Nou also decided to postpone marriage in order to concentrate on her education. Nou is the second oldest child and attends school in an out-of-town college. With the passing of her father a few years ago, Nou was raised by her mother. Nou described feeling an obligation to set a good example for her younger siblings. Unlike Nou's experience and more closely to her mother's, Zong was widowed for many years before remarrying her current husband. Zong was raised in Laos and Thailand and never attended college. She spoke of her struggles of having to survive after moving to the U.S. and having to provide for her family.

Recognizing the idiosyncratic and intricate nature of each woman's journey, the researcher wanted to acknowledge and respect the complexity of each participant's life with her words. Nonetheless, readers are encouraged to evaluate these findings based on their own understanding and personal experiences.

Education

The history and traditions of the Hmong people have been passed on orally from one generation to the next until the invention of a Hmong written language. Hmong children often studied their own written language as well as Laotian and Thai. However, the availability of schooling was largely based on gender favoritism and economic circumstances. Generally, Hmong boys were viewed as more precious than girls because they would someday become the heads of their families. Hmong girls were valuable within the home as caretakers and nurturers of their families.

The Hmong see girls as “other people’s” daughters (Rice, 2000). Zong, who grew up in a very traditional Hmong family in Laos, explained why she was not allowed to go to school like her brothers:

In our country [Laos], they [Hmong people] say that a daughter, even if she is smart and educated, she will only be someone else’s daughter-in-law and will only benefit another family. Thus, daughters must be kept at home to help their parents, so they are respectable. And besides, a daughter who goes to school and becomes educated may become lazy, being unable to help her family with chores such as taking care of livestock and farming. Daughters are trained to be even more hardworking than sons because someday they will become daughters-in-law. If she is hardworking, obedient, and well-mannered, she will make a good daughter-in-law and will get along better with her parents-in-law.

Tapp (1985) points out that the Hmong see daughters as worthless since daughters leave the family upon marriage and, hence, will not be able to contribute to the household (as cited in Rice, 2000). Zong provided an example of why Hmong boys are believed to be more valuable than girls:

As for the sons, they let them become educated because they will help the family and stay with them. The sons will be the one to stay with their family. Thus, this influences a slight preference for sons and places a little higher value on them than on the daughters.

Historically the Hmong culture, a patriarchy, has placed great value and pride in their males. Family lineage and heritage have always been passed through males; thus, the Hmong are still more willing to make educational and financial investments in their sons. Based on the researcher’s personal experiences of being a Hmong woman, she has been taught that men are viewed to be the “public” face of the family and the head of the household. In wanting to maintain a good reputation and image in the Hmong community, parents are deeply concerned about grooming respectable, smart, and strong sons. Since a Hmong woman’s role was to attend to matters and concerns within the family, she was not supposed to be as publicly visible to the

community. Thus, there has been less of an investment to groom young girls to be independent or strong; rather, girls are groomed to be hardworking within the home.

However, education in America has provided the opportunity for Hmong men and women to equally obtain valuable traits such as intelligence and independence. The availability of education has assisted in moving women into a more public domain that use to be dominated solely by men. Thus, there is controversy about the benefits of education. Education has brought more independence for women, but it has also challenged the Hmong patriarchal structure. Many Hmong parents have been torn about the influences of education on their children. Examples of Hmong parents being conflicted with the value of education are demonstrated in the following illustrations. Xue's parents, having never attended higher education, reinforced the notion that education leads to economic independence and a better life for their children. She explained the messages she received while growing up:

Well, my parents tell me to continue school and get a job... They don't want me to live the same life that they lived. As far as education, they probably want me to do better, cause I'm the first generation college student and it seems like I can probably go through with it.

Unlike Xue's parents, who were supportive of her efforts and encouraged her to attend college, Mao encountered a different perspective from her father:

Right now in my life, it's probably one of the biggest struggles I face everyday. With us being the first two girls [children] in the family and being girls, he's [father] pretty supportive. I think if we were boys he would be more supportive, but because of that cultural thing. He says you need to go to school and get an education if you want to, but there's no pressure here.

Having struggled with her father's ambivalent support and encouragement regarding education, Mao, being an educated Hmong woman and parent, shared how her perspective of education differed from her father's in regards to how she is teaching her daughters:

For my daughters, I have two right now, if they want to get married before they go to school [college] that's fine, but just finish high school before you get married. If you're married in high school, you're still very young. You're still not sure about the future. You think you know everything; you think you own the world, but you're not even a step there yet.

Lynch (1999) stated that Hmong women who attend college were expected to fall back into the gender roles they were raised with, yet young Hmong American men were encouraged to use their education to grow, change, and succeed on American terms. Hmong women went to college and learned to expect different things in their lives. Hmong men went to college and expected the same things from their wives. Hmong American men prefer women similar to their mothers; women tied to the gender roles of the past. Thus, Hmong women are faced with this difficult balance, between being American enough to succeed in the United States yet Hmong enough to fulfill the roles of the Hmong culture. Mao, a married Hmong woman and mother of two, discussed her ongoing struggle to balance Hmong and American cultural expectations:

I think that girls are not as pressured as boys are because they will be going into a different clan, their husband's. And if the parents pressure the girls to get an education, they will become very independent. She feels like equal to a man, so when she gets married, her husband is going to have this image of a woman who is subservient to the man. If you can't be like that, then they [parents-in-law] say, "oh your daughter is not following the norm of the Hmong culture. She doesn't listen to us, she only does what she wants." As far as I have seen, if you, as a daughter are unmarried, and you go on to higher education, others [Hmong community] may say, "Oh that girl, who has such an education, will become too bossy and no one will want to marry her."

Right now in my life, it's probably one of biggest struggles I face everyday because in school I'm learning all this stuff and I want to become independent. When I get home there's somebody [husband] higher than me, and if he doesn't let me do it, then I can't. That sometimes angers me a lot.

In contrast to Mao's challenges in conforming to both Hmong and American cultures, other Hmong women have had more positive experiences. Lee (1997) explained that Hmong women's belief in the connection between education and economic self-sufficiency is often shared by their parents. Some women's parents impressed upon them, as children, the importance of getting an education for economic survival in the United States. Zong, a mother

with no formal education, has supported her three adult children in college. Her belief in the value of education is reflected in the following quote:

In this country [America], sons and daughters are equally able to go to school so they can provide for themselves. The law in this country dictates that sons and daughters, at 18 years old, have to be able to provide for themselves; they don't have to depend on their parents anymore. They do not have to live with their parents anymore and are able to have their own residence.

Unlike the support and receptiveness that Zong has offered her college children, Mao and Nou received different responses from their parents. They both have experienced some resistance or fear in response to their decisions to pursue higher education. Mao explained her personal fears regarding her desires to attend school and facing the expectations of her father:

I planned on going to college after high school but I was kind of scared because I was a daughter, to see if my father would let me go. Even if he would let me go, it would be somewhere around our hometown. I was kind of worried too, but if I do well [academically], then if I went [to college] I wouldn't go far, not out of state or anything, only 2 to 3 hours away. That was my dream that was what I wanted in my life after high school...

Nou provided the following incident as an example of the many obstacles she had to overcome in her pursuit of an education:

Two days before college started, she [mother] wouldn't let me go, she said that it was a private college and too expensive. She didn't trust that I could make it through. She said that I was a girl, she didn't, in a way, think that I was smart enough. She think I'll probably get married before I make it through college and she didn't want me to go to too much debt. She had so many people lecture me, so I didn't go there [to the private college].

The following year, Nou was able to convince her mother to let her attend an out-of-town college in a city where her relatives resided, as she claimed that they would be able to help her and watch out for her. After overcoming her struggle to continue school, Nou expressed wanting to send a different message to her siblings by encouraging them to attend college.

A Hmong women's role in the community often earns criticism from her husband's side of the family, who say such things as, "Don't let your wife walk over you, or you'll be worthless," (Vang, 1994). Furthermore, when a woman is more educated and more involved in the community than her husband, a husband's relatives believe that he is not being a "real man." Another very common saying about this situation is: "She [the wife] gets more education and she may leave you if you just sit around or work all the time and don't have any education" (Julian, 1998). Mao, who is a college student, is married and her husband is a student at a technical college; she explained the conflicts they have encountered due to her working towards a higher degree:

As for the relationship between my husband and I, he's afraid that if he lets me go to school what if I become mischievous or leave him because he's not as smart. I think that one thing he worries the most is that I'm becoming so independent; I take care of all the bills, just like a man, because I know English a little better. Everything that requires speaking English I do it all, taking the kids to the hospital or paying the bills. Although he believes that education is to help us, yet he sort of believes that I'm becoming so educated, I'm not assuming my traditional role where he brings home the money and I take care of the household. He's afraid about what others will say of us. They [relatives] might say to him, "You're just like a woman now." There are some cases where women go to college and they end up having affairs. Thus, my husband says to me, what if you go to school and become very educated and leave us [husband and children].

As Mao illustrated, Hmong women seeking higher education have received negative judgements such as suspicion and selfishness. Julian (1998) stated that this newly emerging role of Hmong women not only adds confusion for the married couple but also creates doubts between the wives and their husbands. A woman's new role today not only strengthens [equalizes] the man-woman relationship, but also becomes a threat to traditional male dominance.

Education has opened numerous doors for many Hmong women; they are given an opportunity to compete with Hmong men in employment, academics, and personal aspirations.

Now Hmong men and women are able to obtain the same job and status within the American culture. Hmong women can enter into the same scholastic atmosphere as Hmong men, voicing their wisdom and opinions. Education has allowed Hmong women to step out of their traditional roles that focused only on supporting their husbands and families to pursue their own personal goals and dreams.

Work

In Laos and Thailand, Hmong women's responsibilities and contributions included raising children, taking care of livestock, farming, cooking, sewing, and performing other types of required domestic work that ensured the survival of the family unit. These kinds of responsibilities and chores were most applicable to Hmong women who lived in traditional villages in Laos. Of all the participants interviewed, only Zong was old enough to recall what her life was like in Laos and Thailand. Therefore, the researcher has chosen to use Zong's story as an example of what work was like for Hmong women before immigration. Zong provided an illustration of her daily tasks and responsibilities in her village:

When the rooster crows in the early morning, all the women in the house got up to start the fire, feed the animals, carry water from the well, and cook breakfast for everyone in the family. When the rest of the family wakes up, the men chop wood and bring in the harvest. Everyone comes together to eat breakfast and, then, goes off to work in the fields. The whole family spends their day working on the land from sunrise to sunset. Then, everyone heads home to prepare for the next day. The men bring in more wood for the fire and the new harvest from the day. The women start the fire, make supper, feed the animals, and bathe the children while fulfilling the requests of her husband and parents-in-law. After she has completed all these tasks, she is free to attend to her personal needs, that is if she is not too exhausted. All this good work, and a woman can still be considered lazy.

Zong's example reiterated the expectations of a Hmong woman to be diligent, selfless, and devoted to family members. Accepting her responsibilities without reservations, she was the

caretaker and nurturer of all family members. The Hmong woman pledged an undying devotion and personal sacrifice for her family, as she takes her place as a “good” daughter, wife, and mother. As Zong’s story unfolded, her traditional responsibilities to her parents’ family shifted after her mother passed away. Her roles included being the oldest daughter and a surrogate mother to her siblings. She described her efforts to care for her family:

When my mother died, she left us a little baby, one year old, to my father and I. My father was a military person who was injured and became ill. As a result, he started to use opium. In our world [Laos], there was no law to prevent him from using, so he took opium and was unable to help me. I was the oldest and I had two younger brothers and my father used opium, so I was the one who had to provide for us. I was the one to take care of my two younger brothers and sell things to make money for us. The money was to buy clothes for my brothers and buy opium for my father.

Zong’s personal illustration of her life’s work to care and provide for family members is only one example of the responsibilities bestowed upon Hmong women. The researcher understands that generalizations can not be made solely from Zong’s story. However, she believes that one person’s account may be valuable, as it offers a small glimpse of what some Hmong women’s lives were like in Laos.

Immigration from Laos and Thailand to America has caused a shift from an agrarian system to one that is based on families having two incomes. This shift requires Hmong women and their families to redefine the meaning of work and family responsibilities. They have had to decide how the daily demands of the family are shared and how economic necessities are fulfilled. An example of such work and family negotiations was demonstrated in Zong’s family. Zong, the sole economic provider in her family, discussed how she and her husband have dealt with caring for their family:

He [husband] was a soldier, and he has been injured from Laos. He could only work for a while, and then he became unable to continue to work because of his bullet wounds. So we had to get disability money for him up until now. Everyday now, I am the sole person who works to support my family and my husband, and my mother-in-law lives with us too.

Similar to Zong and her husband, the researcher believes that many Hmong couples have had to renegotiate their roles or responsibilities since coming to America. For example, a Hmong husband who had single-handedly provided for his family may find himself more involved with matters of the household due to the economic need for his wife to also be employed. Hmong families and couples have been required to find a workable balance, shifting from a traditional authoritarian structure to a more egalitarian one. As Hmong women work towards obtaining an education and establishing careers, they may spend less time at home or fulfilling traditional expectations in their families. This requires their families to find new ways to accomplish daily tasks such as preparing meals, doing house chores, and caring for the children.

Hmong women who decide to step out of their traditional roles deal with a range of different reactions from their family members and community. As stated in this researcher's marriage findings, Mao's story helps to illustrate that Hmong women who have started to acquire traditional male privileges, such as educational advancement and economic independence, have been viewed as challenging traditional power structures in their families and culture. These women may receive negative responses ranging from social judgment to lack of support in their endeavors.

From another perspective, however, there have been situations where a woman's economic opportunity and contribution was not seen as a threat to the power structure in the family. Donnelly (1994) provided the following explanation. For first-generation Hmong women, new economic activities did not seem to engender more control of economic resources or a greater sense of gender equality, although the women made explicit economic contributions

to the household. Men and women retained the cultural conviction that men's words were more important than women's, that men's decisions carried more weight than women's, and that a woman took on the social standing of her husband, never the other way around. Women's economic activities were perceived as being permitted by their husbands and their wages or profits entered a household economy where men dominated decisions.

Considering these two different perspectives and limitless others, the researcher concluded that the definition of a Hmong woman's work is constantly being shaped and discerned by her family, culture, community, and herself. Her work was traditionally connected to the demands within the household and the survival of her family. Now the meaning of her work may be more ambiguous as life in America has given her more opportunities for what she wants to do and for whom she wants to do it.

Marriage

Marriage has been an important institution for the Hmong, as it has produced family members and continued family lineages. Donnelly (1994) states that a major reason to marry has been to provide the context for bearing and raising children. Until Hmong marry and produce offspring, they are not considered adults. The cultural belief has been that people who do not marry and produce children never attain true maturity. The "natural" state of a mature Hmong is as part of a married couple with children. Due to marriage being considered the natural state of a mature adult person, many Hmong women have felt pressured to be married. Mao, who got married because of pressure from her husband and community, explained her decision:

[When] I met my husband, he was older than me, 21 years old. He saw me, and he said that he wanted to marry me, just in case he couldn't find anyone because he wasn't very good in school. He had a low self-concept at that time. I didn't want to marry him, he asked [me] a few times. [I told him] I'm only 15 years old. I'm not ready to be a housewife; I didn't know anything yet. I said that I didn't know how to be a daughter-in-law yet.

Well I had just finished my exams of my first semester of my freshmen year. He said to me that he wanted to take me out to eat, to celebrate my exams being over. So I went with him, and he took me to his house and just married me. At first, I thought “oh well.” Since he married me, it wouldn’t look good for me to go back home. Even though I hadn’t really married him yet [since she was just brought to his house and the marriage was not consummated], people will say that I’ve already been married once. I didn’t want that label [from the community], so I got married then.

Mao’s example depicts how a young girl was pressured into marriage by her suitor and cultural practices, despite her personal objections and desires. She also expressed feeling pressure to make her marriage last:

On my wedding day, my uncle said to me: “Mao, after you are married today, if you come back, we won’t accept you back.” They [relatives] said that straight to my face. And they said, “If you don’t make a good life, then we won’t come and see you.”

Having been married for approximately six years, Mao reflected back on how she got married:

Sometimes when I think about women and little girls, I get so emotional. I think, as a daughter, you live with your mom and dad and they take care of you, raise you, and you have a bond with them. Then you leave them [parents] when you get married. And if your husband doesn’t love you, he hits you and divorces you, when you come back home, they don’t want you either, and it’s not even your fault.

Mao’s story reinforces the idea, as suggested in the literature review, that Hmong women often have little say in choosing life partners and marital arrangements, yet they are held responsible for the success or failure of their marriage. Just like Mao, Zong also described a pressure to be married because she was a single mother and widow. Zong’s first husband, who was a general during the Vietnam War, died from an illness. She described their life together:

I was 18 years old when I got married; it was 1973 to 1974, in January. I moved with my husband to a different village and lived there for two years, until 1975, and then we came to Thailand. In 1976, my husband died. One [child] was

9 months old and the other was 6 years old. I took care of my children and worked for the Thai to make a little money to support us.

Zong talked about the cultural status of marriage and how it influenced her to get remarried after the death of her first husband:

My life is more difficult because I am a woman, a Hmong woman. Women do not have as many rights as men. A woman's rights are lower than a man's. The woman has to be under the man. For women who are divorced, in our country, people do not really respect them. As for the women who are widows, people do not really respect them either. There are a lot of widows in our country. These women didn't want to be widows, but it was due to the situation with the war. Their husbands laid their flesh and blood for the country, and this is mainly why there are so many widows. They miss their husbands, but what can they do? It was a time of war. So they hang on day-to-day for the sake of their children.

In the Hmong culture, if you are a widow, the world does not consider you to have value. I'm saying this more specifically to the way it was for the Hmong in Laos. If you are a divorced woman and you refuse to marry your husband, the world can not see you because you have no value. It doesn't matter if you have money or possessions; if you don't have a husband, then you are still not valuable. This is why I decided to get married, because I still wasn't too old yet, and I wanted a husband to help me with my life and see what it would be like.

If you don't have a husband in your home to provide, your extended family or relatives don't really include you when they have parties or meals. Whether they have some good or bad news, they are not likely to let you know.

After the death of Zong's first husband, she described her family losing respect, acceptance, and support from relatives. As stated previously, a woman's value was connected to the men in her life, including her father, husband, and sons. Thus, in order to reclaim cultural respect and significance, Zong made the decision to get remarried.

In 1990, I decided to talk to my children and to see if it was agreeable that I get remarried, so that he [suitor] can come help me take care of my children and be the father of our house, so that that the world could see us and respect us, so that we could be like the rest of the world. So then I got married, and since then things have become a lot better; he has helped us a lot.

The pressure to get married and stay married, burdens not only women like Zong and Mao, who have attained cultural maturity and status by being married and having children. This

pressure is also felt by unmarried young women as well. Xue, a young unmarried woman, shared the messages she had received from her parents regarding marriage:

In Thailand they just expect you [girls] to grow up as some lady and get married. They [Hmong people] don't expect you to be single past your twenties cause that's too old. But now I'm twenty, not married and in school.

What I hear is that as you get older, you're not going to be able to get married cause there won't be guys that will want to marry someone who's in their twenties or mid-twenties. Probably in the Hmong culture, that's too old for girls to not be married. But I'm starting to see more and more of girls who are in their twenties and dating, but they're just not married.

Xue's recollection of the traditional messages she has heard regarding marriage differs from what she has seen here in America. Her ability to challenge those traditional messages has helped her to be stay unmarried and pursue college. Some young Hmong women like Xue have shifted their attention to getting an education before getting married. Xue and Nou made similar statements about wanting to postpone marriage. Xue stated:

I think that it's better that I'm not married; because most of the people [young married Hmong couples] are separated or divorced or they're jobless because they didn't get an education.

Nou stated:

I'm just trying to be a good role model for my sisters so they wait until they finish college before getting married.

The researcher believes that perhaps American mainstream influences have encouraged young Hmong women to delay marriage, despite their own cultural pressures. For instance, early marriages may have been relevant in agrarian villages where the average life span was much shorter and many family members were needed to provide for the family unit. However, in a capitalist society, early marriages may make it more difficult to gain access to economic and education advancement.

The Wife and Mother

Along with traditional practices of marriage, Hmong women's roles as wives and mothers have undergone change and redefinition as well. The traditional expectations of wives and mothers in Laos may no longer be functional in America. For example, in an agrarian village, Hmong women would have been expected to be able to tend to livestock and work on their family's land. However, here in America, where education and financial stability have become significant factors for success and survival, it may be more important for Hmong women to go to school and establish careers. The role expectations in Laos and America are both equally purposeful because they serve to ensure the survival and well being of the family unit.

Since women's contributions as wives and mothers are so valuable to the success of the family, Hmong men and their families have traditionally been very careful in selecting daughters-in-law. The socially approved qualities that a sensible young Hmong man in Laos would be likely to seek in a wife would include industry, obedience, fertility, congeniality, and attractiveness (Donnelly, 1994). He would seek initial approval for the search from his male relatives. He might also consider whether the girl's temperament would suit his mother and the other women in the household. In short, he would take a managerial approach to his marriage, considering his future family and natal family as much as his personal pleasure. The perceptions and qualities of what constituted an acceptable wife were known not only among male suitors but also among young Hmong females as well. Xue, an unmarried young woman raised in America, talked about the conditioning and teaching she received:

My parents always tell me, because they are guys they have the right to do those things [dress differently] because they are guys. And even if they get ruined, they can still get married and have a family, but girls can't, cause they'll be ruined forever and nobody will want to marry them. They [the Hmong culture] judge the woman mostly by appearance and what kind of clothes they wear and it should not be too baggy but just perfect. Um...probably casual, professional looking.

I think before they go get a wife for their son, they have to look at how obedient that person [daughter] is in their parents' family.

I think once a girl is ruined, she's ruined forever in the Hmong community. But for guys, they may be gangsters, or rapists, or wife-beaters, but cause they're male, they are higher then...you know.

I don't think it takes that much to get ruined, you can go out late with friends, um... have friends that people don't think are acceptable, or friends that are different. Because you stay out late, they suspect that you are doing devious stuff like having sex or doing drugs.

Unlike Xue's upbringing, Zong was raised in Laos and had more traditional expectations to fulfill. She described her expectations as a daughter-in-law:

When parents become too old to care for themselves, then it's up to the son and the daughter-in-law. Because the son goes and marries a woman and bring her to live with his parents. However, as for Hmong girls, she is very nice too, but when it is time for her to get married, they will go live with her husband, where her husband's parents live. However, a son will bring his wife to come live with the family and help farm, cook, clean, feed livestock, take care of the family, and when the parents are too old and can no longer farm, the son and daughter-in-law will have to provide and take care of the family.

Traditional roles and expectations of wives and mothers are being altered as Hmong refugee families come to realize that the American culture has different standards by which women and men sustain and contribute to their families. For example, it may not be as necessary that young Hmong women know how to farm or make tapestries, while it is important that they can obtain reliable employment in supporting their families. Xue gives an illustration of how she has tried to balance Hmong and American expectations:

Right now, I just want to finish school and hopefully get my master's, I don't really want to settle down cause I want to travel and all that stuff before start a family.

I think I have more expectations, school expectations, family expectations, and work. So I have to put everything together.

As Xue has tried to meet the expectations of both the Hmong and American cultures, she expressed a belief that things may become more equal between Hmong men and women; nevertheless, there is still gender inequality in mainstream America:

[In America] I think it's starting to change a little bit because they're [the Hmong people] starting to see that girls can accomplish what boys can. I think it will be better for the women, just in general, cause things will be almost equal. Yet you'll still have that feeling that guys are still dominant. Even in the United States culture, males are still dominant. It [sexual inequality] will always be there.

As Xue has identified, Hmong women have been caught between two cultures. As they navigate between Hmong and American cultures, these women have been forced to find a flexible and sometimes ambiguous balance that acknowledges and respects their personal worth and individualism. Many of their expectations and roles are in an ongoing state of transition and negotiation. It is the knowledge, strength, and resiliency of Hmong women that has enabled them to sustain themselves and survive in both cultures, both of which have, at times, overlooked their contributions.

Chapter Five

Summary

Refugee Hmong women from Laos and Thailand have traditionally been the nurturers and caretakers of their families. As little girls, they have been conditioned to be diligent, obedient, and respectful of the men in their lives. Hmong women have obtained value and respect through their roles as wives to their husbands, mothers to their sons, and daughters-in-law to their husbands' family. The patriarchal Hmong culture has historically dictated that Hmong women, as quiet, patient, and obedient individuals, support the needs of their men and family members. These cultural dictates have limited Hmong women's opportunities and personal power in areas such as education and marriage.

Young Hmong girls and women have not been afforded an equal opportunity to schooling; rather, Hmong families have deemed it more important to educate their sons due to their future positions as the heads of households. Hmong daughters were considered more respectable and valuable if they could accommodate daily familial demands and display proper etiquette for their future in-law family. Thus, young girls seldom obtained an education in Laos and Thailand, unless public schooling was available in their immediate villages.

However, immigration to America has opened new educational and economic opportunities for Hmong women. Hmong women are able to compete with men in obtaining academic success and financial independence. With women acquiring these traditionally male privileges, they are faced with diverse reactions from their culture and family. Hmong women are faced with the difficult task of being American enough to succeed in America and also Hmong enough to fulfill their "female" roles in the Hmong culture. Successful and independent women, who were once subservient and obedient to the men in their lives, are challenging the Hmong's patriarchal social structure. Hmong women's traditional roles within their families are

constantly being negotiated and redefined through cultural adaptation and assimilation into the American culture.

Educational opportunities have allowed Hmong women to not only move towards gender equality in the realms of academia and economics, but also within the family unit. Hmong people traditionally believed that a woman's value was based on her ability to care for her immediate family and eventually her husband's family. Most of the Hmong woman's work centered around her responsibilities to help with completing daily household tasks, farming, producing goods, and performing other duties that ensured the well-being and survival of the family unit.

Immigration from Laos and Thailand to America has challenged and altered the Hmong people's conception of being able to thrive and persist. Traditional agrarian practices of survival needed to be changed as the American economy dictates that survival is not based on crops or livestock but rather on financial independence and material possessions. Thus, the historical practices of ensuring survival for the Hmong family needed to be redefined, bringing a change to the Hmong's traditional division of labor between men and women. Hmong men and women are forced to reevaluate personal opportunities and contributions within the family structure.

Along with the negotiations between men's and women's work contributions in their families, Hmong women have also gained new footing in regards to marriage decisions in their lives. Thus, some Hmong American women are choosing to postpone marriage until they have fulfilled personal aspirations and independence. Thus, Hmong American women have continually diverged from Hmong women in Laos and Thailand. Traditionally in Laos and Thailand, Hmong females seldom had power in determining courtship and marriage decisions. Decisions regarding courtship, choosing a mate, and marriage were predetermined by the male

and clan elders. Marriage has been an important institution in the Hmong culture as it offers a context for the production of children and the continuation of family lineages. The institution of marriage is so important that often times young Hmong individuals were not considered mature until they were married and had children. When all marital matters had been settled between the groom's and bride's families, the Hmong female was then considered a permanent member of her husband's family and fell under the control of her husband and his parents.

In traditional households, the female spent all of her life fulfilling the needs of her husband, children, and parents-in-law. A Hmong woman's worth had often been centered around her ability to bear children, sustain matters within the household, and care for family members. The definition of a "good wife" was a woman who kept a good social reputation, stayed at home, and took care of her husband's household. She accepted her role as a wife and mother, having little decision-making power and demonstrating an unquestioning obedience to her husband and parents-in-law.

However, these traditional expectations of the Hmong wife and mother have undergone transition and redefinition, as Hmong women in America have redefined these roles. For example, Hmong American women who have obtained higher education and who have established careers have more openly expressed their wisdom and desires regarding marriage and motherhood. These more independent Hmong women have challenged and shifted traditional power structures within the home as well as the Hmong social expectations of a "good wife." Traditional Hmong expectations of wives and mothers may no longer be functional in America, the necessity of education and employment become primary factors for survival.

Conclusion

As once mentioned, the researcher is a Hmong woman who is constantly balancing her role within the Hmong and American cultures. It is her own journey that has provided her with a first-hand account of the many transitions that Hmong women encounter. Her opportunity to obtain an education has helped her to reevaluate her position in regards to marriage and family, to have a stronger voice in her future family, and to want more respect for her voice. She has delicately chosen to exert more power and influence in regards to the decisions being made in her life, but she is also consciously and cautiously aware of the Hmong cultural expectations she faces.

Although the researcher's personal journey as a Hmong woman gives her experiential knowledge, she does not claim to be a sociological or anthropological expert on Hmong women or the Hmong culture. She only speaks from her personal experiences as Hmong woman and first generation refugee and from the stories of the women interviewed for this study. Her unique position in relation this to topic gives her not only academic knowledge, but lived experience as well.

The author has had to deal with the many implications of immigration and redefinition concerning the Hmong woman's role within Hmong and American cultures. The researcher has realized, through trial and error, that the balancing act between the Hmong culture, the American culture, and her own personal standards has indeed been a delicate dance of negotiations. It has been the researcher's hope and intention to illustrate this dance by conducting this study and using Hmong women's voices to tell about their journeys.

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Appendix A

Consent Form for Participation

Project Title: The Impact of Immigration on Hmong Women

Kaying Lo, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin – Stout, is conducting a research project regarding the transitions in Hmong women’s lives due to the Vietnam War and immigration to America. The researcher hopes to devote a study to understanding and learning about Hmong women’s lives from their perspective. This a study in which approximately three to five Hmong women are interviewed about the life changes they have faced due to immigration.

Your are invited to participate in this study by volunteering to be interviewed by the researcher.

It is anticipated that this study will not present any physical, emotional, mental, or social risk to you. The information gathered from your interview will be kept strictly confidential and the findings of this project will not contain your name or any identifying information.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. If at any time you choose to stop participating in this project, you may do so, without coercion or prejudice. Please feel free to simply inform the researcher.

As a willing volunteer, you will not receive any form of compensation, such as money, for your involvement or contribution.

Once this study has been completed, the analyzed findings will be available for your information.

Any questions or concerns that you may have before, during, or after the research project should be addressed to the following individuals:

Researcher – Kaying Lo lok@post.uwstout.edu

Research Advisor – Dr. Terri Karis karist@uwstout.edu

Questions or complaints about the rights of research subjects can be addressed to Sue Foxwell, Human Protections Administrator, UW-Stout Institutional Review Board for the Protections of Human Subjects in Research, 11 Harvey Hall, Menomonie, WI 54751, phone (715) 232-1126.

I, _____, understand that by signing this form, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study. I am aware of the basic nature of this study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I understand the potential benefits from the successful completion of this study. I understand that the researcher will protect my confidentiality as a participant by concealing all identifying personal information about me. I realize that I have the right to refuse to participate at any time during this study without coercion or prejudice.

Participant’s Signature

Date

Appendix B

Survey Questions

Across the Ocean: The Impact of Immigration on Hmong Women

The researcher is carefully choosing resources that involve the perspectives and voices of Hmong women. It is the researcher's intention to give Hmong women an opportunity to interpret their own stories. She hopes to draw possible similarities among the stories and struggles of Hmong women who have journeyed to America as refugees. The author seeks to devote a study to understanding and learning about Hmong women's lives from their perspective.

As we start this interview, please feel free to talk about whatever it is that you are comfortable with. There are no right or wrong answers, this is simply an inquiry about your personal experiences. You can stop anytime you want.

1. What was your life like before the Vietnam War?
2. What was your life like during the Vietnam War?
3. What is your life like now, after coming to America?