



Hard Work

By Lynette Nyman
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Part of [This Is Home: The Hmong in Minnesota](#)

1998 was a tough year for the Hmong in Minnesota; tragedy piled on tragedy with perhaps the worst being the murder of six children by their mother. Yet while they have been very much in the spotlight in recent months, the story of the Hmong and their struggles are largely unknown to other Minnesotans.

Around 150,000 Hmong people live in the United States. Saint Paul has the largest urban Hmong population in the world. They traveled thousands of difficult miles to get here. Since then it's been a time of wrestling with questions about their culture and how to thrive in the larger one in which they live.

After living in the United States for nearly 20 years, Yer Vue, Vu Xiong, and their eight children appear to be an average Hmong-American family. They live in a small house in Saint Paul. A Hmong New Year shrine is in one room while a large-screen television entertains the kids in another. English and Hmong words swirl through the air. The door jambs are greasy with hand prints of passing children. Yer gives her daughters a few dollars to buy some food at the corner grocery. When they return, the children sit down to eat.



Yer, Vu, and Family.

On this night the menu is canned tomato soup and soda crackers. Afterwards, if she's not too tired, Yer might prepare boiled chicken, a traditional Hmong dish that's a sign of prosperity. But her daughter, Pakou, says she won't eat it.

Pakou: I don't really like to eat Hmong food. I hate boiled chicken so much. I hate boiled chicken.

Pakou helps her mother around the house by doing the dishes. Mee, another daughter, babysits in the afternoon before her father comes home from his job, and while her mother sleeps before going to work. But it's hard to find any peace with eight children. The youngest is four years old. Yer says people are often surprised to learn the size of her family.

Yer: They say "eight?" And I say "yes."
They say "oh, I can't believe it."
And they say "how do you feel?"
And I say "crazy mother."
That's what I say: "crazy mother."



Yer's daughter Pakou

She's not crazy. She's doing what her ancestors have done for thousands of years. 5,000 years ago the Hmong were farmers along the Yellow River in central China. Later, they fled to China's highlands. There, they practiced "slash and burn" agriculture. A laborious process of clearing the land with an ox, and planting just enough food to feed an extended family.

In the 18th century, the Emperor of China ordered the execution of the last Hmong King and his family. King Sonom had reigned a people that rebelled against the Chinese government as they clung to their political and cultural independence. Rather than face war and persecution, hundreds of Hmong people fled to the mountains of Vietnam and Laos, where they flourished in relative peace for almost two centuries - until the 1950s, and the beginning of more than 30 years of war in Southeast Asia.

As the conflict broadened, the Central Intelligence Agency recruited and trained Hmong men for the "Secret War in Laos." They became soldiers, built airstrips, rescued downed American pilots and tried to block North Vietnamese troops from heading to South Vietnam. After the Americans withdrew, the communist government of Laos marked the Hmong people for "re-education camps" and elimination.



Rooftops in a Hmong Village.

Ilean Her's family was one of the first to get out because an uncle in the military told them to prepare to leave. Her remembers playing outside when suddenly everything changed.

Her: My father comes running back and he says "this is the day. We need to go down to the airfield." And we were running. And I remember there were tons and tons of people. And I remember my mother saying there were tons of people just fighting like crazy to get into the planes because there were so few of them. And lots of families were separated because some people got on the planes and some people didn't.

Her was seven years old when the airlift took her family to Thailand where they lived in a refugee camp. Most Hmong refugees looked to France for resettlement. Her hoped her family would choose the same, but her father thought the United States offered more opportunities. About a year later, they left the camp for Iowa and, later, Minnesota. A lot has changed for Her since then. Today, she's a lawyer who directs the Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans.

Her: In the last 20 years the Hmong experience has just really been reacting. You come here, you sort of like landed, what do you need to do just to make sure that you're okay without really planning and thinking: "Okay, this is where I want to be in 20 years. This is where I want the children. This is how I can help to plan for their success and my success and the family's success."

Her says Hmong families have come a long way since the early days when everything was different and new. Then, even something as mundane as turning on a gas stove presented a problem. Finding jobs and learning English were the top priorities. Public assistance allowed for some time to adjust and gain new skills. People moved around from state to state looking for work and family. Some of the movement continues - a kind of second migration. Last year, an estimated 10,000 Hmong people left California for Minnesota. Over time, gender and generation gaps have developed. For example, Her says young Hmong people put money and material wealth first.

Her: I know for the older community, my parents' generation, they really value the Hmong culture. And they really want their children to know more about that. And so they're - and if you talk to young people they'll say their parents say the same thing all the time - you can have as much education as you want. You can have as much economic success coming your way, but if you don't know your culture, if you don't know the traditions, then it means nothing.

Today, a quick flip through the Hmong-American telephone directory shows signs of assimilation and American success. There are listings for doctors, bankers, and other professionals. A number of social-service agencies are listed too.

Professor Jeremy Hein, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, has studied refugee populations since 1975. Hein says the Hmong have a strong communal identity and a high level of community organization. In one study Hein found Hmong create more self-help organizations per Hmong

person than Vietnamese, Lao, or Cambodian people.

Hein: Of course, like other groups, they are trying to achieve upward mobility in our society, educational advancement, and to work on inevitable problems that arise. But what strikes me and impresses me about them is that they're trying to do that as a group.

That's difficult in the United States, a place which validates individual achievement. For the Hmong, one person's success or failure touches the whole.

One show of communal spirit was in 1998 after a Hmong woman killed her six children. Hmong community leaders called forums to discuss the tragedy. And an Asian-Pacific Policy Task Force developed an initiative it hopes will strengthen Hmong families in Minnesota.

Yer Vue and Vu Xiong often talk of an easier life in Laos; as if deep in nostalgia for good times despite the war and the loss of family. It's a life none of their children know since all were born in the United States. Recently, Mee, the eldest at 15 years old, disappeared for a few days and didn't tell her parents where she was. They were frantic until they found her at a friend's house. Yer says she tries - but often fails - to discipline her children.

Yer: They like to be freedom so sometimes they don't come home. So you don't know. If you ask them they say they are American. We are American so we do whatever we like. So you can't tell anything. So it's hard for me.

Yer stayed at home looking after her children for 14 years. Now she has a job outside the home. Both Yer and Vu are machine operators at IC Systems, a printing company near Saint Paul. Yer's on the night shift ; Vu on the day, working six, sometimes seven days a week to earn over time. Vu says he's concerned about his children's future. He'd like them to attend college, but it might be too expensive. He says his dreams are on hold as he struggles to meet day to day needs.

Xiong: I think if I had a mother and father or I have someone to support me, I would be in school and get more education and get more skills, but nobody here so right now we working as much as we can to get the money to support the kids and pay the bills. We got a lot of bills to pay credit card, house payment, car payment, water, heater, telephone, food ...

These are very American concerns, yet Vu and Yer still have one foot firmly in the Hmong culture.

When Yer's mother, Doua, recently died, Yer and Vu held a traditional Hmong funeral. It was three-days long with a drum and bamboo pipes calling spirits to accompany her on the journey to the next world. Yer says accepting the loss of her mother is now her greatest challenge; something she'll never get over especially now that both of her parents are gone. Still, Yer and Vu have eight children to guide. And the stakes are high as their children grow up in a world Yer and Vu don't fully know and understand. Pakao Photo Credit: Marlin Heise China Photo Credit: Yuepheng Xiong



Yer Vue dressed for Hmong New Year when she was 13.

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