



## Leading People

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

*New leaders are appearing in Minnesota's Hmong-American population. In a community where elder clan leaders were once the primary voice of authority and counsel, young men and women have emerged to take their place. They're not as familiar with Hmong ritual and tradition, but they know how to maneuver in American society. It's a big change, especially for the women who could never hold leadership positions in traditional Hmong society. Hmong-Americans are dealing with a power shift within their community.*

**HONG SOCIETY IS BASED ON A CENTURIES-OLD SYSTEM** of nations and clans. There's the white, blue, and black Hmong. Within each of those nations, there are clans such as the Vang, Lyfoung, Her, Xiong and others. The clan system shapes much of Hmong life. For example, marrying someone in your own clan is forbidden. Ancestry is traced through male ancestors and Hmong men are the clan leaders. They advise their members and help resolve disputes. They also negotiate marriages and how much a groom's family must pay his bride's family to have her. Someone like Chai Fue Xiong could do that. A man in his 50s, Xiong has been a CIA-trained soldier, a clan leader, and a business owner. He's lived in Minnesota for 15 years.

**Xiong** : When I arrived in the Twin Cities I was hired as a mediator or family counselor with Lao Family Community. After a year, the program ended so I was laid off. So then I start my own Asian grocery store where I worked for many years until last year when I sold the store to start a car-selling business.

Selling used cars requires the art of negotiation, so Xiong might have a leg up on his competition. But he's most concerned about problems the Hmong face here that they rarely experienced in Laos such as divorce, depression, and violent crime. Many clan leaders like Xiong feel powerless to help those in need, especially as young people seek assistance from the outside. Xiong says most clan leaders are watching from the sidelines.

**Xiong**: Yes, we are. Even I am. But since we are here we can't do anything. We don't have the power to exercise our thought. We still - if we heard that someone was raped and murdered - we love the individuals, we care about the individuals. If we heard that someone has been murdered, we are in tears. We care about the individuals, about the family. Even if we heard if someone has left the family and leaving the children at home and not returning, we feel sad and sorry about the family, but we are just not in a position to help resolve or address the issues.

Clan leaders believe the mainstream system won't provide long-term stability and cultural identity for the Hmong people. But a new generation of leaders is trying to rise to the challenge of bridging the gap between traditional Hmong values and the realities of life in the U.S.

**Hang**: Do you think that as a community, as a larger community, and as a Hmong community - for those of us who are Hmong - that we really accept violence as a part of our lives and that's why we have it?



MayKao Hang

May Kao Hang is speaking about violence in the Hmong community to Century College students in North St. Paul. Hang is concerned about many of the same problems and issues as the older, male clan leaders. Her presentation is about a violence prevention program called "Hmoob Thaj Yeeb" or "Hmong Peace." As the project's coordinator, Hang is often in the public's eye; quite an accomplishment for a Hmong woman who's 26 years old. And yet, it's not surprising at all given Hang's family. Her father is a respected clan leader. Hang says because of that, she's always had an interest in public service.

**Hang**: I remember, as a little girl, shadowing my father at different meetings. And probably because he didn't have a son at the time. When I grew up and then my mom had a boy then he started doing that, but I was really kind of his sidekick for years. And so, I think from age eight or nine and you first start thinking about the world, I was kind of into public life and public service and never really left it.

In traditional Hmong society, women's leadership is indirect. They give advice behind the scenes. So Hang's high public profile has brought her both ridicule and praise. She's somewhat odd for Hmong cultural standards. She married late and has only one child. And she's an outspoken, educated woman with firm ideas about justice and equality. She says while watching her father and other clan leaders mediate disputes, she found certain patterns troubling.

**Hang**: That whoever it was who was distributing justice wasn't being fair to the woman. And this isn't always the case. There are certain things you can have the family do to take responsibility for the violence that's happening, but nine times out of 10, I would say it would be a message to the woman to be patient. He will change. Be patient. It really aggravated me, I think, and it still does. And if that's what being a leader means, stepping forward and saying "you know this needs to change," then, yeah, I guess it's something that I want to do.

Hang is one of a new breed of Hmong leaders. Unlike clan leaders steeped in old ways anchored in the homeland, these young women and men speak fluent English, understand mainstream social and political systems, and head programs and organizations. This is not to say traditional clan leaders are completely displaced. Many continue to seek counsel from clan leaders before going to others for help. But Dr. Yang Dao, a scholar who now works with Saint Paul Public Schools, says the shift in leadership is permanent.

**Dao**: Our Hmong in the United States, as well as in the world, are looking for new leadership. And Hmong leadership has already shifted from the old generation to the young generation who are more educated, more professionally competitive, more aware of international evolution. That means Hmong leadership, the young people, are more competent to lead the Hmong community to social, economic, and political development.

Dao says there's room for both new and old leaders: the economic and political leaders who understand the American ways as well as cultural leaders who know Hmong customs.

**Dao**: I talk to my Hmong countrymen. I said "even though I have a Ph.D., don't ask me to negotiate for your marriage because I don't know the marriage rites. I don't know anything about that. So for you young people, you have to go and ask the old Hmong leaders; the old Hmong traditional, knowledgeable people."

But the young people are moving further and further away from Hmong traditions. Still, many clan leaders cling to the hope the old ways will enjoy a resurgence and find a place in the United States. Others are prepared to accept and let go. No matter the path, Hmong culture in America is rapidly transforming under the pressures of youth, assimilation and the need to survive.