

Preface

The 1990 U.S. census of population counted some one hundred thousand Hmong in the United States, more than forty thousand of whom are in California. Minnesota and Wisconsin ranked next, with over sixteen thousand in each state. Many studies have been done of the Hmong since they entered the United States as refugees in the late 1970s, but few of these contain accounts of Hmong experiences told from their own perspectives. This book, the first collection devoted entirely to first-person Hmong narratives, was produced in collaboration with four of my Hmong students at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Since Southeast Asian Studies was one of my areas of specialization in graduate school, I have been more interested than have most of my Asian American Studies colleagues in the refugees who have arrived from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia since Communist governments came to power in those countries in 1975. As their numbers increased, I realized it was important to document their traumatic experiences during the war, during their flight, and after their arrival in the United States. But since I do not know the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, or Hmong languages, I had to find indirect ways to record their stories.

During the 1979-80 academic year, I offered a course called "The Vietnamese Experience in America" at the University of California, Berkeley. To my knowledge, that was the first time such a course (in contrast to courses on Vietnam *per se*) had ever been given in the United States. Since there was virtually nothing available to assign as readings, I told the students in that class that much of the course

Preface

work would consist of writing. In addition to writing assignments on various topics, the students wrote their autobiographies as a way of beginning to chronicle their people's survival and adaptation. I have kept the essays from that class all these years. Selections from these autobiographies, plus others written by Vietnamese students I have taught in subsequent years at the Berkeley, Santa Cruz, San Diego, and Santa Barbara campuses of the University of California, will appear in two forthcoming books.

In contrast to the numerous Vietnamese American students I have known, no Hmong students attended any of my classes until 1989, when I began teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). One day, soon after I had spent only half a lecture discussing why the Hmong have come to the United States, one of the two Hmong students in my large introductory Asian American history class told me that his siblings and cousins now all wished to attend UCSB because I had done something that no other faculty member had ever done: include the Hmong in my curriculum. Deeply touched by how much such a token inclusion had meant to my student and his family, I asked him and his friend if they would be willing to help me interview older Hmong for a study of their experiences in Laos, in the refugee camps of Thailand, and in the United States. They agreed to do so.

In time, four students—Thek Moua, Lee Fang, Vu Pao Tcha, and Maijue Xiong—became my collaborators. At first, I gave them a set of questions to ask their interviewees, but I learned very quickly that such a methodology would not work well. In Hmong culture, younger people are expected to show great respect for their elders, and since asking questions is construed as a sign of rudeness, my students felt hesitant to interrupt the interviewees when they were speaking. So we discarded the formal questions. Instead, I told my students simply to ask their elders to tell about their lives from the beginning to the present and discuss with the students whatever aspects of their lives they wished to focus on. With this change in approach, the potential *interviewees* became *narrators*.

Furthermore, rather than try to collect a representative sample—representative, that is, in a positivist social scientific sense—I asked my student collaborators to gather the life stories of selected members of their own families because I thought the latter might be more

Preface

willing than others to talk freely with them in order to teach them something about their heritage. In addition, since in Hmong society members of three or more generations often live in the same household, I hoped that by asking members of different generations within the same families to recount their common experiences, generational as well as gender differences might emerge. Though no claim is made here that the life stories in this book are representative in a social scientific sense, there are enough similarities among the narratives (told by individuals who grew up in different localities) to indicate that the experiences recounted here are not unique and provide a fairly reliable picture of how the Hmong lived before and during the wars of the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, because the narrators talked about many topics, this book offers multifaceted and nuanced portraits of Hmong life during that period.

In addition to the narratives of the students' family members, there are two life stories, in Chapter One, that are included in this volume because the narrators have played a central role in helping other Hmong families to settle in Santa Barbara County, Jou Yee Xiong, the head of the Xiong family in Goleta, was the first person whom my students and I interviewed. He was an important community leader in Laos and, to this day, he is considered a leader of the Hmong community that has been transposed to Santa Barbara County. Local Hmong say he is more knowledgeable about the history of his people than anyone else in the area. His son, Ka Pao Xiong, has played an even more important role: he has served as the key link between the Hmong residents and various social service agencies in Santa Barbara County. His account reveals how a few educated individuals like him managed to help a people—who, until quite recently, depended on slash-and-burn agriculture for survival—to learn to function in the highly technological society of the United States.

The students began taping the narratives during their visits home. Sometimes, unable to finish, they simply left a tape recorder behind and asked the relevant family member to keep talking into it. We discovered that the information recorded during these unmonitored sessions was sometimes qualitatively better than what was said in face-to-face situations. Though more repetitious, these segments contained more details and more personal sentiments. This is particularly true of the women narrators. I had asked the students to

Preface

talk to their grandmothers or mothers alone, without the presence of the menfolk, if at all possible, because I had noticed during the first interviews (which I attended) that men often interrupted women as they talked. As a result of this strategy, two grandmothers quite freely expressed their bitterness toward their deceased husbands, thus highlighting some of the ways in which women were mistreated in Hmong society. The stories told by the other women in this book also indicate very clearly the crucial contributions that Hmong women make: it is they who perform most of the backbreaking work in subsistence as well as cash-crop farming in their homeland.

This book also includes four autobiographies written in English by my student collaborators, each of whom gave a title to his or her work. The rest of the life stories, in contrast, are neither verbatim oral history transcripts nor written autobiographies. Rather, they are best described as twice-mediated tales. The first round of mediation occurred when my students translated the taped narrations into English. The vocabulary they used reflects both the colloquial American English they have picked up (such as “you guys,” which I changed to “you children” in the case of a mother speaking to her children) as well as some of the more technical concepts they have learned in college (such as a shaman’s “altered state of consciousness,” or “culture shock,” which I left as written).

Sometimes it is quite obvious that they used words or terms that reflect concepts or practices that probably do not exist in Hmong society. For example, one student, in translating her mother’s story, had written that her grandmother “dated” many men. I changed the word “dated” to “saw” because dating, as a social practice, is culturally specific to American society, though it has now been adopted by young people in cities around the world. In other words, although “courtship” is a near-universal phenomenon, “dating” originally was quite American.

These and other editorial changes I have made in my students’ English translations represent the second round of filtering. I corrected grammatical and spelling errors, rearranged some sentences and paragraphs for greater coherence, and eliminated some place names and minute details that might have caused confusion. The few minor additions that I made for the sake of clarity are shown in square brackets. For example, because most Americans know so little about

Preface

Laos, I indicated in square brackets that Vientiane is that country's administrative capital, where major government offices are located. (Until 1975, Laos also had a royal capital—Luang Prabang—where the king and his family resided.) I even inserted brief explanations for certain facts about the United States. For example, I indicated that Isla Vista is contiguous to the campus of the University of California at Santa Barbara, because this bit of information is relevant to understanding why one of the first Hmong families to be resettled in the United States came to Isla Vista, given the pivotal role that some University of California, Santa Barbara, students played in the process.

Let me explain why I decided to edit my students' English translations. I have no doubt that, like most people speaking in their native language, the speech of the Hmong is *not* "broken." Therefore, it would be an insult to them to translate their stories into an English script that contains grammatical and spelling errors, under the misguided notion that such a rendering would be more "authentic." My students made errors because they had to learn English as a second language. They very much wanted me to "clean up" their translations and their own writings, so that they read as smoothly as possible. They know, and I know, that one distinct form that racism in America has taken is the singsong pidgin English that many writers have used to depict the speech of Asian immigrants. As young immigrants, they have been taunted repeatedly for looking different and for not speaking English like "real Americans." Such humiliation is something that I myself also experienced when I arrived in the United States at the age of fifteen. For these reason, we do not want to present the life stories in poor English.

I am cognizant of the argument made by practitioners of the "new ethnography" that an unequal power relationship exists between indigenous informants, or narrators, vis-à-vis the scholars who record them and inevitably tamper with the material they record. While the editorial changes I have made may be criticized as an imposition of my "academic agenda" upon the storytellers, a different interpretation is also possible: what I have tried to do is to make it possible for the narrators to share the stories of their lives with non-Hmong readers. The five English-speaking narrators (the four students and Ka Pao Xiong) read over each of the edited stories, made changes in

Preface

them, and approved them for publication. Thus the editing was done with the explicit consent of individuals who represented themselves as well as members of their families.

Though my methodology may involve more tampering than is acceptable to those scholars who believe in the pristine nature of the words uttered by women or indigenous narrators, this book is the best approximation of Hmong “voices” we have available at present. For those who understand Hmong and would like to hear what the narrators actually said, I have deposited the original cassette tapes in the special collections department of the university library at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

The life stories recounted in this volume are valuable because they describe not only the myriad hardships the Hmong have experienced in Laos—a country ravaged by decades of war and revolution—and in the miserable refugee camps in Thailand, but they also indicate how some Hmong feel about their lives in the United States today. These reflections reveal many emotions, even though in traditional Hmong culture individuals are not supposed to show their feelings in public at all. In short, these are stories not only of suffering, but also of strength, courage, determination, and dignity.

Since it is now widely recognized that an author’s or an editor’s “position” greatly influences his or her scholarly writings, I would like to state my convictions regarding American involvement in the wars in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and my attitude toward refugees from those countries who have settled in the United States. Throughout the war, I was an antiwar activist. Along with other left-leaning young Americans, I disparaged those who collaborated with the United States—especially South Vietnam’s political and military elite and the Hmong mercenary soldiers in Laos paid by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency—because they seemed to represent forces of venality and corruption.

Since 1975, the intellectual and political lenses through which I view that war have not changed much, but as I became acquainted with the refugee students from those countries, I have added a new dimension to my thinking. Sympathizing with their suffering and admiring their courage, I decided it is important to relate to them as human beings, rather than as children of people who may have espoused ideologies or engaged in actions to which I was opposed.

Preface

I became mindful of the fact that the immense problems that their homelands have experienced since the war ended—problems that have led to the unprecedented exodus of refugees—resulted from the enormous destruction unleashed upon those nations by America's most sophisticated weaponry during that long, sad war, as well as from failings of the present leaders of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and their policies.

Sobered by the recognition that cruelty and exploitation are not confined to anyone political system, whenever I have tried to integrate the experiences of these refugees from Southeast Asia into the larger story of Asian Americans, I have chosen to emphasize the tragic commonalities that mark the human condition. Though I do want my students to understand the conflicting political causes espoused by succeeding generations of leaders in various Asian countries *and* by U.S. foreign policymakers during the Cold War, I try to examine this history in a way that does not make anyone in my classes feel guilty. As many generations of students have taught me, when some individuals in a class feel defensive, it becomes difficult for the class as a whole to learn from each other and from history. It is in this spirit of enhancing understanding and mutual respect that this book has been created.

Given the range of topics covered in the narratives, this anthology is suitable for assignment not only in Asian American Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and U.S. immigration history courses, but also in courses on the family taught within sociology, anthropology, or psychology departments. And, of course, since the narratives deal with events in Laos, this book would be appropriate as a text in courses on Southeast Asia and on the American involvement in the wars in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Students taking courses in these fields, with the exception of those enrolled in Southeast Asian Studies, are unlikely to know a great deal about Laos and about the Hmong, however. That is why I have written a lengthy introduction to place the life stories into their larger historical, political, and social contexts. However, there are topics I probably do not delve into in sufficient depth to satisfy those who are especially interested in cultural differences among new immigrants and refugees and between them and Euro-Americans. Readers who are more interested in the kinship system, religion, customs, or other aspects of

Preface

the social organization of Hmong life than in their political history may refer to the extensive bibliography I have provided to facilitate further study. This bibliography lists most of the available English-language writings about the Hmong and a selection of the existing literature on Laos.

My student collaborators, Lee Fang, Thek Moua, Vu Pao Tcha, and Maijue Xiong, who have adapted to life in the United States and are doing well in college, represent the “success stories” in the Hmong American community. But the success they have achieved is only part of the picture, since a vast majority of the Hmong continue to live in poverty, without much hope for improving their lot. Thus, while these four students may appear to be further examples of Asian Americans who, for the past quarter-century, have been touted by journalists and scholars alike as the “model minority,” their accomplishments are, in fact, the exception rather than the rule.

Maijue, Vu, Thek, Lee, and I have produced this book because we hope it will enable other Americans to better understand the Hmong. At the same time, we like to think that the life stories collected here will serve as a record of the legacy that young Hmong Americans, who may no longer know the language of their ancestors, are inheriting today as they struggle to find a place for themselves in the multiethnic and multicultural society that is America.

Santa Barbara
May 1993

SUCHENG CHAN

Jou Yee Xiong's Life Story

as told to Lee Fang, Toek Moua, and Vu Pao Tcha

My name is Jou Yee Xiong and I am sixty-six years old. More than a hundred years before I was born, the Hmong people had migrated from China into Laos and other places in Southeast Asia. The Hmong had been fighting with the Chinese; those who were not taken prisoner moved southward, while the captives remained in China. Many Hmong were captured and tortured during their migration.

After arriving in Laos, the Hmong lived in the jungles and sometimes fought against the French in Xieng Khouang Province, and especially on the Plain of Jars. We had a leader named Chao Ba Chay who led this resistance. The French asked the Hmong, "Why are you always fighting?" The Hmong responded it was because they were not allowed to rule themselves. So, the French gave them control of the region where many Hmong lived.

The Hmong lived only in the highlands, because every time we went to the lowlands we got sick. Our elders believed that the lowland Lao had put a curse on us, so that anyone going to the Lao towns would get very sick and die. Just as Hmong knew how to use black magic, so, too, did the Cambodians and Lao. The Hmong believed that the Lao, especially, could kill people by slitting their throats internally. We sometimes visited the towns, but only during our New Year's festival in January. Otherwise, we never went there.

Chapter One

Up in the mountains, we farmed with only a few simple tools. Each village had only two or three axes and hoes, which people used in turn. Only one in every three families had a large butchering knife for slaughtering pigs and cutting up the meat. We purchased iron from the townspeople to make these tools.

Everyone between the ages of eighteen and forty* had to pay taxes to the French as well as to the Lao chieftains who protected the villages. If a father served on the village council, however, only two of his sons, rather than all of them, had to pay taxes. Paying taxes was not easy. The Hmong were not educated enough to know how much gold and silver or diamonds were worth. We only knew how to grow rice, corn, and vegetables to feed ourselves and to raise animals which we sold for profit. There were a lot of wild animals, including wild boars, in the jungles that we hunted for meat. These wild animals often came to eat our crops at night. They especially liked young ears of corn. Without guns, we could not eliminate them. Since the crops we grew were not sufficient to feed us and the wild animals as well, we were poor and had a hard time paying our taxes.

My grandfather was a leader in our village. He had nine daughters and two sons. The younger son was my father. While my mother was still in labor with me, my father died. My grandfather cried for a year because he had fond hopes that my father would succeed him as the village leader. Then my grandfather, too, died. We suffered greatly. Our crops were not sufficient to feed us.

The most helpful individuals in my family were my two grandmothers. They cultivated *mang*, a kind of hemp whose fiber was used to make thread and cloth. Its skin had to be removed and its stem sliced with great caution. The skin was then pulled apart and the fibers rolled together to make thread. During our long treks to our fields, we rolled the *mang* between our palms as we walked. On the way home, we did the same thing. After dinner, we also worked on the *mang* till we fell asleep. Our grandmothers used a machine with a pedal to weave the threads into fabric, with which they made us clothes. Since it took so much energy to make cloth, each of us got only two new suits of clothing a year. We were so poor we had

*According to Alfred W. McCoy (1970), those between eighteen and sixty had to pay taxes. [Ed.]

no shoes. The Hmong did not know how to make shoes, so there were countless times when thorns pricked our soles and our feet were bruised all over. When I was young, we even went hunting in our bare feet.

Since there were a lot of lice and fleas where we lived, our grandmothers boiled water to bath us every two or three days, as well as to wash our clothes. We had to use hot water to kill the fleas. When our hair got long, our relatives shaved our heads, so that the lice had no place to hide. However, in those days, many Hmong liked to wear a bundle of hair on top of their heads, covering it with a cap.

At age fifteen, I began to learn the lowland Lao language. By the time I was twenty, I could read and write it. When I was sixteen, I started working as a messenger, going from town to town. Every year, one month before the French started collecting taxes, they sent a letter to each village. My job was to deliver these letters to the leaders of the villages. Those who could not pay the taxes had to work without wages for fifteen days, paving roads, building bridges, and constructing houses. Sometimes it took two or three days just to get to the worksite. People had to bring their own food. Since the French did not work on Thursdays and Sundays for religious reasons, it took almost a month to finish the work. Sometimes people died while working and never went back to their villages.

Around this time, the imperial Japanese army came to Laos. Up till then, even under French colonial rule, the Hmong had been controlled by Lao chieftains, though each Hmong clan had its own leader. Nong Het [the center of a Hmong autonomous district east of the Plain of Jars] was governed by Hmong. Other parts of Laos were under the central government. When the Japanese seized power from the French, the leaders of the Lo clan joined the Japanese. They drove away the French and the latter's Hmong allies, the Ly and Moua clans. Captured French soldiers were taken to prison camps in Vietnam. They were later released and sent back to France. A number of the French soldiers who were not captured went to live with the Ly and Moua clans in the jungle. When the United States bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan lost World War II and the Japanese soldiers in Laos returned to Japan.

During the war, after working for two years as a messenger, I became a servant to some government officials. I watched over their

Chapter One

property. I got married when I was twenty and had two children by age twenty-five. Then I was given the title of “tax collector,” even though no one under thirty-five was supposed to serve. I helped those who were too poor to pay; they promised to reimburse me later. Also, I gave them suggestions on how to come up with the money to pay their taxes.

In 1953, missionaries came to our village. I, along with my family, converted to Christianity. I stopped teaching my sons many of the Hmong ways because I felt my ancestors and I had suffered enough already. I thought that teaching my children the old ways would only place a burden on them. Instead, I began to teach them how to do things differently, so that they would not suffer as Hmong had in the past.

Our suffering was due to the fact that we had no country of our own. We did not live in any stable community. We were always moving. Hmong never had any land or any permanent place. We have always practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, moving from place to place. We lacked education, but we did learn bit by bit [to live in the modern world] from lowland Lao merchants who came to our villages to sell us sugarcane in exchange for our opium.

After the Japanese left, members of the Ly and Moua clans, carrying handmade weapons, went looking for the French soldiers who were still hiding in caves and took them to their villages. The French soldiers sent word back to France that they were still alive. Soon, French airplanes dropped them weapons [on the Plain of Jars]. Because we had helped the French to win, they gave us greater autonomy after the war. Touby Lyfong was put in charge of all the Hmong villages in the Plain of Jars. He asked for help to send some Hmong youth to school. Three of these students later helped General Vang Pao govern the Hmong between 1960 and 1975.

The parents of Touby Lyfong, and of Vang Pao, Lon Hong, and Nhia Vue all belonged to the Hmong aristocracy. That was why they were able to educate their children by hiring teachers to come to their homes, there being no schools available. Touby and several other Hmong later went to study in Vietnam, since there were no colleges in Laos. One of them then went to France, while Touby returned to Laos. After the Japanese were defeated, those Hmong studying in Vietnam returned home, and Touby and his sons were recognized as leaders.

The Xiong Family of Goleta

After World War II ended, the Ly and Moua clans continued to help the French to fight. This time against the Communist Pathet Lao and their ally, the Lo clan. Initially, the French and their Hmong allies were victorious and drove the Red Laotians and the Hmong of the Lo clan into Vietnam. However, the latter soon returned and fought the Ly and Moua warriors all the way to Nong Het. But the Ly and Moua men regrouped and drove the invaders back to the Vietnamese border.

Later, when the Red Laotians came again, they came not as fighters but as thieves. They robbed the rich in Nong Het. Those who were not robbed migrated elsewhere. These thieves came to our village also and they tied up our leaders, including me. When we yelled for help, however, they ran away. This incident seared us, so we fled to the jungle, where we lived for several years without any decent houses. The thieves took over more and more territory and became powerful. The Laotian central government tried to capture their leader, Prince Souphanouvong. They succeeded and imprisoned him in Vientiane. Souphanouvong's brother tried to get him released but failed, so he persuaded an air force commander [named Kong Le] to turn sides. A civil war broke out in Vientiane, during which Souphanouvong escaped.

The Laotian central government, as well as the Hmong leaders, knew they could not win the war without modern weapons. So, they went to the Thai government and asked for help. The Thai gave them some cannon, with which they pushed Kong Le and his forces out of Vicmiane and into Vang Vieng. But, unable to hold their ground, Kong Le and his troops moved to Mount Hang Hed. There, they battled Vang Pao and his followers. Vang Pao lost and sought refuge in the jungles.

Vang Pao came to our village and asked for help. With our aid, he made his way to Camp Padong, where airplanes dropped us food, weapons, medical supplies, and other miscellaneous items. Six months later, Kong Le shelled the camp repeatedly for three months. Everything was destroyed, so we could no longer live there. We fled to Phakhao to build a new base and an air strip. Laotian planes supplied us with military and construction materials. Vang Pao was made a general, with authority over the Phakhao base and the region surrounding it. He became responsible for all military, economic, and social affairs.

Chapter One

In 1966, I decided to leave the war zone, so I told our leader, Tou Pao, that I did not want to fight anymore. I did not want to be a soldier; instead, I wanted to farm. I asked for permission to go to Sayaboury [a province bordering Thailand]. Tou Pao allowed my family and several other families to take a plane to Vientiane. We stayed there for twenty days to get papers for going to Sayaboury. We left Vientiane on an American airplane. When we got to Sayaboury, we built a village at the edge of the jungle where some Hmong had already settled. We called our new village Nam Hia. As soon as we had enough people, our elders decided to build an irrigation system. The Americans supplied us with equipment, while the Hmong and Lao did the construction. It took three years to complete the irrigation works, after which we could finally farm.

Since the Hmong had always practiced slash-and-burn agriculture in the mountains, we initially did not know how to farm the lowlands. Each family was given a certain amount of land—usually a plot measuring 300 by 100 meters. We had to learn how to talk to buffaloes. If you do not know how to talk to the buffaloes, they will not listen to you. To plow the lane, we had to use buffaloes. It is not like here in America where you can use tractors. I did not know how to speak the buffaloes' language, so I had to learn it in order to get them to work. I had to learn to say, "Go. Go. Go to the right, go to the left."

We grew wet paddy rice [in contrast to the dry upland rice grown in the mountains] to feed ourselves, corn to feed our animals, bananas, sugarcane (whose stalks we chewed, as we did not know how to make sugar), pineapples, and all kinds of vegetables. The first seven years we lived in Nam Hia, our harvests were very good and we had an abundance of rice in storage. Laotians from Luang Prabang came to buy our rice, sugarcane, and pineapples. We prospered and our standard of living reached that of the lowland Lao.

We lived in Nam Hia for nine years. We were happy finally to have homes and land that belonged to us. We gained hope and worked harder. But our happy life did not last long. We had become friends with the missionaries there, so we knew that if the Communists from Vietnam ever came to our village, both the missionaries and those of us who were Christians would be persecuted.

When General Vang Pao left the country, we had to leave also,

because there was no one left to protect us. I had three sons. Pao, who had graduated from a college in Vientiane, was working for the Americans; another son was in school in Sayaboury; a third was in Luang Prabang. My son Pao, who had a telephone in his home, called us when he heard the news that General Vang Pao was fleeing. He told me. “We Hmong can’t stay in Laos. Vang Pao is going to Thailand. He is leaving today. Decide if you want to go or stay.”

I cried because I did not want to go without my sons. But I thought it over and decided to leave. We left our home without taking anything. I did not want to sell our stored rice, but my wife wanted to do so. I told her, “If we cannot make it to Thailand, we will come back here and eat it.” But my wife insisted, “No, we’ll sell it.” So we sold half of it, for two hundred thousand Laotian *kips* [Laotian currency]. We could have sold the other half for five hundred thousand, but we had no more time, so we just left it in storage, along with five buffaloes and our house that had cost us fifteen thousand Laotian *kips* to build.

We only brought along three small children who were still feeding on condensed milk, a number of older ones—all members of our clan—and some silver money. Nam Hia was very close to Thailand. When we went there on foot to do business without carrying a lot of goods, it took only three days at most to get there. However, when we fled Laos, we had to carry a lot of food and had our children along, so it took us twenty-eight days to get to the Thai border. When General Vang Pao left, he told everybody that if we did not cross the border within a month, we would no longer be allowed to do so. We were very scared. We did not know if we could make it. My son Pao eventually caught up with us. He hid his important documents in his hat. We, on the other hand, had stored our money and other important items in a suitcase back at the village. My son told me that the journey by land to Thailand would be difficult, so he suggested we turn back so that our family could fly to Thailand. He said he still had access to either a helicopter or an airplane. However, there would be room for only our family. I had a meeting with the other elders and they said, “If you leave us, we will face greater difficulty. So, if you choose to go back, all of us will return with you. But if you want to proceed to Thailand on foot, all of us will follow.” We realized that should we retrace our steps, we might very

knows how to speak Thai.” That night, I called all my fellow Christians for a meeting. I took the Bible and read from it. Then we all prayed to Jesus Christ to help us convince the Thai officials to let us in. We prayed all night. Thank God, Jesus answered our prayers. While we were praying, the Thai came and told us we could go and that nobody would stop us. I was very happy. The news made everyone happy. It took us four more days to reach Thailand. Some elderly men and women could not walk and were carried by young adults. When we finally reached Thailand, we felt free.

We stayed in a refugee camp in Thailand for three months, then we were sent to Bangkok, where we stayed another three months. Our food ran out after the first two months and we went hungry. We had only then thousand Laotian *kips* left. In Laos, such a sum could have bought food to feed us for a long time, but when it was changed into Thai currency, the money was not worth much and we could buy only a little food. Our papers still had not arrived, so we could not leave for the United States. We called long distance to our American Christian friends in Isla Vista, California, to ask them to send us some money. It cost sixty *baht* [Thai currency] to say just six words on the phone. Our friends sent us eight hundred U.S. dollars. We changed it to Thai money and rented a place and bought a lot of rice and kitchen utensils. During our stay in Thailand there was a flood. Our children caught the small fish in the water and we cooked them. We also ate other animals that lived in the water. We now laugh about those days, but they were very degrading.

Our papers finally came. We went to the airport at three o'clock in the morning. Since it was still dark, we never saw what Bangkok looked like. The place we had lived in, in Bangkok, was downtown near a square where four streets intersect. There were a lot of soldiers standing around, so we were afraid to go out to see the city. We lived like caged animals. Nobody knew the city and we did not know anyone who wanted to show us around. We went out only once during those months, when a Hmong who had studied at a university in Bangkok rented a small car and took us to see the stores.

On our way to the airport, twenty-seven of us were squeezed into a tiny bus. When we got to the airport, two Americans greeted us and took us to a big airplane. It was morning, around eight o'clock. The sun had risen by the time we got into the plane. So we left

Chapter One

Thailand. We flew in the air but we did not know where we were going, only that it was some place in America. We stopped in Hong Kong for an hour, during which the flight attendants were changed. From there, we flew to Japan. It was already dark when we landed in Japan. After the plane was refueled, we flew to Hawaii. The trip from Japan to Hawaii did not seem very long. We stopped for an hour and changed planes. The American airport inspectors, who had never seen Hmong silver money, said nothing when they searched our bags. But when I walked through the security gate, it made a sound. So, they searched me and found my silver money, which I was wearing around my waist. In Thailand, I had told the airport officials that the silver was my property and my good luck charm. They understood and let me keep it. But I did not know how to explain to the Americans what it was. They took all my money in front of everybody. My children laughed at me and said, "See, you did not want to use it to buy us food, now they are taking it all away from you." After they inspected the money, however, the Americans gave it back to me. We then flew to Los Angeles.

We were the first people of such stature to come to the United States, so people were very frightened of us. They had been told that we had long tongues and ate humans. Two very courageous persons came to pick us up at the airport. The Americans in Thailand had telephoned them and told them our names and said that we would have tags around our necks with our names written on them. When we arrived in Los Angeles, we put our tags around our necks and got out of the plane. Suddenly, there was a couple in front of us, saying, "Pao?" My eldest son did not hear them, so my second son told him, "Pao, those people are calling you." The Americans took us to the bathrooms first and then we rested for three hours before catching another plane to Santa Barbara.

We had left Thailand on December 29, 1975. When we arrived in the United States, it was still December 29 [since we had crossed the international dateline]. After spending one night here, it was December 30. The day after that was December 31. Then came January 1, 1976. So it is easy to remember when we came: at the end of 1975 and the beginning of 1976.

Our American friends from Isla Vista took us to the house where we were to live. Life was very difficult for my two oldest sons be-

cause they had to take care of everything but they could not speak English. Our friends brought us food—mostly bread, peanut butter, and jam, but we could not eat such unfamiliar things. We fed the sandwiches to the children, while the adults ate rice. My younger sons wanted to eat some meat but they did not know how to ask our friends for any. My sons spoke some French, but the Americans did not know French. So my sons took a piece of paper and drew a pig. The Americans finally understood. After that, they brought us some pork every week.

Our American friends took care of us for seven months. Then they found us jobs. They took my two sons, my son-in-law, and me to work for a company that built speed boats. We worked there for a month. The work was very difficult. We came home with bruises all over our arms. When our American friends saw our injuries, they took us to the hospital. Then they found us lighter work at a pharmaceutical company. When they discovered that Pao could speak some English, they sent him to another place to work, while the other three of us continued in the same company. There were forty Hmong working there and none of us knew a word of English. My boss used to joke with me. He asked, “Why do you never speak? If you just say ‘coffee,’ then I will get you some coffee.” I did not want to talk, but he kept bothering me. I finally asked my boss for some coffee, but he told me, “All you have to do is pour it in a cup. You can do it yourself.” And that is how I got coffee.

I did not try to learn English because I felt I was too old. Although I know some words, I will never be able to express myself correctly. In Laos I used to be a very good speaker and had no trouble expressing my thoughts. But with English, I know it will not be the same. I do not like people to make fun of me, so I never bother to say anything.

After three months, the four of us got our paychecks. We now could buy our own food, but our American friends still paid our rent. When we realized that we had enough money to both buy food and pay our rent, our American friends told us now that we were able to support ourselves, they were going to stop helping us. They told us not to be unhappy about the situation. Should we need help, they said, we could still call on them.

So with the help of God, we have worked and found good jobs.

Chapter One

After we had been in the United States for a year, we were allowed to sponsor our relatives in Thailand to come here. After our relatives arrived, we sought financial assistance for them. We Hmong did not have any association to help us get public assistance, so we joined the Vietnamese one. A Vietnamese leader helped our relatives to get on welfare. But our American friends did not want to sign the papers to put us on welfare. They said they had not brought us to the United States so we could be on welfare. They wanted us to depend on ourselves. They said, "In life, if we do not learn, we will never be able to do a lot of things. If you wait and depend on others, you'll never learn." They signed the papers only for those who were in a really bad situation. The later lived on welfare for two years until they, too, found jobs.

[After we saved some money,] the first thing we did was to buy a car and learn how to drive. It was a new experience. We were all afraid of cars but after a while some of us learned how to drive quite well. At that time, Isla Vista was not so crowded, so we could drive without any problem. There were rarely any cars in Isla Vista during weekends. My son drove people to the store, to work, or to other places. But after a while, he got tired of taking care of everyone. So we decided to buy another car. Soon the person driving that car also thought people were asking him to do too much, so we bought additional cars until almost everyone had a car.

After a few years, life became harder as our rent went up. There was also a law saying that too many of us could not live together in one place. So we had to find another place but the ones we liked were all too expensive. Places for which we could afford the rent we did not like. One of my sons-in-law decided to go to Stockton where, he was told, he could find cheap houses to rent. Four families went with him. After a year, however, two families came back, and the year after that another family returned because they could not find jobs in Stockton. But the one family that stayed helped other Hmong to settle there. That is how Hmong got to Stockton. There are a lot of Hmong there now.

My son-in-law, who remained in Stockton [for a while], could not find a job either. Fortunately, he met a Chinese who worked for American growers. The Chinese worker took my son-in-law to a place where his family did not have to pay rent. They just had to

buy their own food. They worked for the American growers picking fruit and doing other farmwork. After three years, however, they had differences with the American growers, so they came back to Isla Vista. They had managed to save a little money, so they decided to buy a house, because no landlord would allow our entire family to live together. In two years' time, when our family grew too big, we bought another house—a large one—in Lompoc [where the real estate prices are lower].

My sons and I are not wealthy people. We are just workers who want to survive. We are not ambitious. We do not wish to go into business and get rich. We live like poor people but we are happy and do not envy others. We like living quietly and simply. I have three sons who have very good jobs and two other sons who are in college. I am waiting for the last two to complete their education. Since I have so many grandsons, relatives, and friends, it is hard for me to become wealthy. I cannot say whether I will continue to live like this for the rest of my life. If, one day, God wishes me to [become wealthy enough to] take care of my fellow Hmong, I will do it. But if that is not God's wish, then I will continue to live the same way as I am living now.

My family was one of the first Hmong families to come to the United States. My sons were among the first Hmong to study in the American educational system. One is studying in Los Angeles and the other is at the University of California, Santa Cruz. We arrived in two families with a total of twenty-seven persons. Since then, my sons-in-law and sister-in-law have sponsored their parents and other relatives who were living in refugee camps in Thailand to enter the United States. Through this process, we have brought our entire [extended] family here, but we have no difficulty buying food or paying our bills, even though at first it was hard financially. But we always help each other out and no one starves. Most members of my family now live in Lompoc.

Before we came, we were asked, "When you lived in Laos, did you know anything about the judicial system? Did you ever commit a crime, a misdemeanor or felony?" I answered, "No, I have not committed any of those things." They also asked me, "What was your occupation?" I answered, "In Laos, I farmed and grew my own food." One month after we arrived, our sponsors took us for a drive

Chapter One

along the Santa Barbara coast to Solvang. Along the way, we saw some deer, which seemed very friendly, so we started hunting for squirrels, pigeons, and deer. We were sworn to abide by the hunting regulations, but we assumed that so long as we did not shoot other hunters, we could hunt. If Hmong have violated the regulations, it was because we did not understand them.

Before I left the refugee camp, I was also asked, "What is your religion?" "Christianity," I replied. Since coming to the United States, I have not feared anything. With Jesus as my guiding light, I am not afraid wherever I may be. That is why I was able to bring my family and close relatives to the United States, in spite of the fact that others in Thailand warned us it would be very difficult for us to survive. Many people tried to persuade me to remain in Thailand, but I ignored them and came. I told them, "If my family perishes in America, then none of you should follow in our footsteps. But if we succeed and have a good life, then you can decide whether or not you want to go."

Soon after we settled here, I recorded a cassette tape and sent it to my son-in-law in the Thai refugee camp. I told him, "If you want to come, I shall sponsor you. If I am able to survive, so can you." On the tape, I told about what life in the United States is like. I said there would be no way for Hmong to farm or build their own houses because Americans use machines to do those things. When Americans wish to remove half a hill to build the foundation for a house, they can do it. I also reported that Americans do not raise animals the same way Hmong do. Animals here are raised by the thousands. The eggs they collect from hens are also in the thousands, compared to the twenty or thirty we gathered in Laos. However, there was other work we could do. If I have not died, I said, others would not either. After listening to my tape, everyone wanted to come. We have, in time, sponsored all of them. That is why there are quite a few Hmong living in this area today.