

Hmong and Lao Refugee Women: Reflections of a Hmong-American Woman Anthropologist

By

**Dia Cha, PhD
Saint Cloud State University**

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Abstract and Introduction

In 1992, Ms. Dia Cha – then a graduate student in anthropology at Northern Arizona University – traveled to Chieng Kham Refugee and Napho Repatriation Camps in Thailand, and the village of Ban KM 52, in Vientiane Province, Laos, to research issues concerning the repatriation to Laos of Lao Lum and Hmong women refugees. This article, originally written upon the return from these travels and in partial fulfillment of the requirements for her Master of Arts degree in Applied Anthropology, considers the findings made and the insights achieved on this journey of discovery. In particular, the work discusses changes and continuity in the lives of Lao Lum and Hmong refugee women in the camps. Also addressed in considerable detail is the impact of the author's status as an educated Hmong-American woman and former refugee on her interactions with female and male informants residing in the two refugee camps. Ms. Cha, who spent much of her early life in such refugee camps as are herein described, has, in the intervening period, become Dr. Dia Cha, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies at St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Minnesota, USA. The research project she describes was funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women and executed by the American Friends Service Committee (The Quaker Services). Ms. Jacquelyn Chagnon joined Ms. Cha during the second phase of the research, in Napho Repatriation Center, and later in Laos; however, the following article, produced originally in 1992, was written solely by Ms. Cha.¹

Overview

In the wake of the political turmoil in Southeast Asia of the late 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of people were uprooted from their homes to seek sanctuary in Thailand; many of these refugees² have

¹ Ms. Cha and Ms. Chagnon jointly wrote, in 1993, a report for the United Nations Development Fund for Women, entitled "Farmer, War-Wife, Refugee, Repatriate: A Needs Assessment of Women Repatriating to Laos."

² Both the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol define a refugee as a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or to a particular political opinion, was outside the country of his nationality and was unable or – owing to such fear – was unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (Yu 1991:6).

since resettled in Western countries such as the United States, Canada, and France.³ As of 1992, however, about 50,000 such refugees – Hmong and Lao – remained in designated camps in the Thai hinterlands. Some of these people refused to resettle in Western countries, while others were not eligible for Western resettlement and were due to return to Laos, despite an expressed reluctance so to repatriate. Indeed, many in the refugee communities of America and abroad harbored grave concerns about the safety of such repatriation.

At all events, no one had voiced any concern specifically with respect to the safety and the welfare of refugee women, despite the fact that, in many ways, they constituted the most vulnerable component of the refugee population. Some of these women were widows, some were divorcees, and some were simply alone after suffering separation from older offspring and other close family members. Many were old and weak, or even handicapped; some had no relatives remaining in Laos. In a region, and as members of a society, that is largely male dominated, all women without male assistance and support are at risk to some degree. It is in this context that the project detailed herein was undertaken.

The purposes of this project were to assess the needs and concerns of refugee women; to address possibilities for their protection as they planned to repatriate to Laos; and, finally, to make recommendations to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as the various concerned Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), for a course of action which might be expected to alleviate the uncertainties of repatriation.

Throughout the duration of the project, the author was able to maintain both an insider's and an outsider's perspective. On the one hand, the author's own childhood experience as a camp resident yielded much insight into the character of refugee life, especially the life of refugee women and girls. On the other hand, professional training as an anthropologist – training which is geared to the cultivation of sensitivity, open-mindedness, empathy, and a nature which declines to enter into judgment – coupled with

³ In this paper, the terms "resettle" and "resettlement" refer to the process whereby refugees move out of refugee camps to resettle in third nations. The terms "repatriate" and "repatriation" may be construed to refer to a process whereby refugees move out of camps to return to Laos.

the capacity to communicate enjoyed by a native speaker of the primary language involved, greatly assisted in establishing close ties with many of these refugee women and in understanding their world.⁴ As the research progressed, in fact, it became increasingly clear that the author had been placed, both by circumstance and the people around her, in a position intermediary between the Hmong world of the refugee and the Western world of the scholar. There, she was in a unique position to intercede on both sides in an attempt to clarify a variety of potentially awkward situations that arose over time. It will be seen in the course of this article that this created certain complications, and occasionally threatened to overwhelm the impartiality which is said to be one concomitant of effective research. It was, nevertheless, from this position, at the junction of these two worlds, that the author attempted to make sense of the situations with which she dealt, to build bridges between what were frequently mutually exclusive traditions, and thereby to guide this project to a successful conclusion.

Research Methods

To complete the research project herein described, Ms. Cha, for the three months from February, 1992, to April, 1992, conducted interviews with the Hmong refugees of Chieng Kham Refugee Camp. For the second phase of the research – conducted in Napho Repatriation Center for two weeks during June, 1992, and for one additional week in Vientiane, Laos, during July, 1992 – Ms. Cha was joined by Jacquelyn Chagnon, an international development specialist who had been active in Laos since 1978. In Chieng Kham Camp, Ms. Cha began with a survey questionnaire, followed by focus group discussions, participant-observation, and in-depth interviews of key informants. Thirty-eight people participated in the survey interviews; two focus group discussions took place, with a total of twelve participants; and five key informants were involved with the in-depth interviews. In Napho Repatriation Center, twelve focus group sessions were conducted, with approximately one hundred sixty women attending in groups of six to twenty-five. In Vientiane, one focus group and three individual interviews were conducted with Hmong women who had already repatriated.

⁴ It should be noted that, while the author was fluent in Hmong, she was largely without Lao; Ms. Chagnon, fluent in Lao, took the lead in interview sessions with Lao Lum women in Napho Camp.

Description of Chieng Kham and Napho Refugee Camps

Chieng Kham Refugee Camp was opened in 1976 in Phayao Province of northern Thailand, and, at that time, occupied twenty-five hectares of land. It was positioned approximately twelve kilometers from the Lao-Thai border, and, by the spring of 1992, the UNHCR official figure for the Chieng Kham camp population was 18,000. Of this population, ninety percent were Hmong, about eight percent Mien, and the other two percent Lahu and other ethnic groups (UNHCR Chieng Kham Refugee Camp Briefing Paper, 1992).

In 1982, a refugee camp policy was initiated – ironically labeled "humane deterrence" – which had the unfortunate effect of insuring a greatly attenuated level of camp services.⁵ It was hoped that this policy of humane deterrence would reduce the "magnet effect of drawing additional refugees, as well as negating the impression that flight automatically leads to resettlement and/or improved living standards." The policy aimed "to encourage refugees to opt to return to their countries as soon as possible" (CCSDPT 1986:20). Chieng Kham Refugee Camp was officially closed in 1995.

Napho Repatriation Center was opened in 1977 on a sprawling site of some eighty-five acres located in Nakhon Phanom Province, northern Thailand, twenty-five kilometers from the Lao-Thai border. The camp was instituted with the mandate that it "provide temporary shelter for Lao Lum asylum seekers until the number of earlier arrivals had been resettled."⁶ Since its founding, however, the camp had gradually expanded to accommodate an ever-increasing population, and the resident population had

⁵ The humane deterrence policy was "designed to discourage all but the genuinely persecuted and truly needy from seeking asylum in Thailand." Under this policy, incoming refugees were detained in camp, where services and resettlement opportunities were deliberately kept to a minimum. In 1986, this policy was modified somewhat, and, as refugees moved out of the camp for third country resettlement, refugees from other, closing refugee camps in Thailand were transferred to Chieng Kham camp. Also, new arrivals from Laos to the region were sent to this camp until about three years prior to commencement of the research herein detailed, i.e., ca. 1989, so that the resettlement option was still open to qualified refugees of this camp as the research commenced. The Thai government had, nonetheless, announced that this camp would be closed by the end of 1993, and, for this reason, all refugees in the camp were forced to decide either to resettle in other countries, to repatriate to Laos, or to transfer to Napho camp (UNHCR Chieng Kham Refugee Camp Briefing Paper, 1992; and The CCSDPT Handbook, 1986).

⁶ In this article, the term "Lao Lum" (Lowland Lao) is employed to refer to the roughly two million ethnic Lao of Laos. The term "Lao" is employed to refer to the overall, multi-ethnic population of Laos, numbering some 4.17 million. (See LAOS, UNDP 1991 Report.)

been augmented, also, by refugees transferred in as the result of the closures of other camps. In addition, while Napho had, at one time, served only Lao Lum refugees, in 1990 it was declared a repatriation center, strictly defined; thus, those highland refugees not eligible for resettlement in third nations were also sent here.⁷ In consequence, as of June, 1992, the UNHCR's official figure for the camp's population was 12,608, of whom 5,250 were Lao Lum; 5,160 Hmong; and 2,000 were persons of other ethnicity (UNHCR Napho Refugee Camp Briefing Paper 1992).

From 1977 to 1981, resettlement opportunities were prohibited to residents of this camp, but after 1983 – and until 1990 – the Napho population was allowed to seek this alternative. Once the camp was declared a repatriation center in late 1990, however, the resettlement option was once again rescinded, and no resettlement processing center was furnished the residents. The Thai government, meanwhile, expressed plans to close this camp some time before 1995. The camp was officially closed in 1999.

In both of these camps, refugees lived in "long houses," of which there were about one hundred sixty in Chieng Kham camp and two hundred in Napho camp, each house sheltering a maximum of twenty families. These long houses were built directly on the ground, and encompassed walls which consisted of wood panels and woven bamboo. Roofs were fashioned from tin sheeting; the floors were hardened earth.

In the communal areas of these long houses, no walls separated family units; the small, open spaces being used for cooking and as dining and living areas. Evident in each area was a movable clay stove placed on the floor; while large, ceramic water jars were positioned at one end of each unit. Kitchen utensils were hung on pegs or placed upon open shelves along the walls; firewood was stored against one wall or stacked in a corner; makeshift family dining tables and wooden, or woven bamboo, stools – ranging from six inches to three feet in height – were also in evidence. Most families did not have a sufficiency of household utensils, and sharing was the norm. Although most residents of these houses were strangers when first assigned a unit, they soon became each others' friends and "relatives."

⁷ The adjective "highland" and the noun "highlander" are employed in those instances in which it is intended that an ethnic distinction be made with respect to the Lao Lum (or Lowland Lao; see footnote 7, above).

The sleeping area of these long houses was originally built as an open space, running from one end of the structure to the other, and most houses incorporated a long wooden "mattress" that spread from one wall to another of this open space. With no dividing wall to furnish nocturnal privacy, most refugees had constructed makeshift partitions of blankets, plastic sheets, woven bamboo, or what have you, to isolate somewhat the portion of sleeping platform allocated to each family unit.

In many ways, the quality of life in the refugee camps had, of necessity, been affected by crowding, a factor which very naturally grew in significance as populations increased. Chieng Kham camp was more crowded than Napho, so that the long houses were closer to each other and there was no space for gardening or for use as a playground for the children. Perhaps not surprisingly, the fence around this camp was also more secure and the Thai guards more alert and watchful for any attempt at escape. Only refugee leaders, and those in need of medical treatment, were given permission to leave camp. Napho, meanwhile, being somewhat less crowded, featured more space between houses, playgrounds for the children, and gardening space for adults. In addition, during the day refugees could, after securing permission from camp authorities, go shopping in the nearby town.

Children were much in evidence in both camps; in fact, UNHCR estimated that fifty percent of camp residents either were born in Thailand or fled Laos "when they were too young to remember the country. Few had direct experience of the war or of persecution" (UNHCR Chieng Kham and Napho Refugee Camps Briefing Papers, 1992:2).

Another factor common to both camps was the authority ultimately responsible for the manner in which they were run; both Chieng Kham and Napho were administered by the Thai Ministry of Interior (MOI) – a branch of the Royal Thai government. MOI staff representatives, all Thai nationals, were present in both camps, and each camp was headed by a Camp Commander responsible both for the management of daily affairs and for camp security. In these tasks, MOI staff members collaborated with UNHCR and NGO representatives, and consulted with delegated refugee leaders or directly with refugee committees (UNHCR Chieng Kham Refugee Camp Briefing Paper, 1992, and The CCSDPT Handbook, 1986). While MOI administered justice within the camps, and reserved the right to make all final

decisions on serious matters, both refugees and/or UNHCR representatives were permitted to register a formal protest and/or to make an appeal in cases of dispute.

UNHCR, too, had branch offices at both camps, each of which was headed by a Field Officer, invariably a male of European nationality; the remaining staff members were Thai nationals. The UNHCR officers held a mandate to monitor refugee life in order to avert rights violations and to oversee all programs funded by, or run in cooperation with the UNHCR.⁸ In addition, at the time this study was undertaken it was UNHCR policy to promote repatriation.⁹

In both camps, refugee committees had been formed, the members of which were charged with assisting in the regulation of internal administration and security, although, as a practical matter, they involved themselves primarily in the development of educational curricula, the arbitration of domestic disputes, the arrangement of marriages and divorces, and the organization of a corps of security volunteers who served as night watchmen. Committee members were drawn from different ethnic backgrounds; however, all were male.¹⁰ Some women's support groups existed in the sections of Napho camp maintained by the Lao Lum, but such groups were maintained exclusively by and for Lao Lum

⁸ There was one UNHCR officer in Chieng Kham camp, two in Napho camp. Of those in Napho, one was charged with providing protection for refugees and with monitoring service programs in camp, while the other was responsible for the dissemination of public information in the form of newsletters and videos, and via the conduct of a variety of public events and meetings held to inform refugees about new policies with regard to repatriation and resettlement.

⁹ In the wake of the political and economic liberalization of the former Soviet Union, the Lao government began slowly to open its doors to the West. In consequence, it became UNHCR policy to assert that it was now safe for most Lao refugees in the camps of Thailand to return home, despite the continuing existence of antigovernment resistance groups in Laos and the resulting outbreaks of violence. Disinclined to accept this UNHCR position, however, refugee representatives insisted that the UN initiate conflict resolution discussions between refugee spokespersons and the Lao government prior to any large scale return, lest refugees be caught up in the fighting; this, however, the UN declined to do.

¹⁰ There were twelve refugee action committees in Chieng Kham camp, and these committees assisted with such functions as: education and sanitation, action in judicial matters, and arbitration in questions of traditional culture. The educational committee met with representatives of UNHCR, with concerned members of a variety of NGOs, and with officers of the Thai MOI in an effort to develop school curricula. The judicial committee met to decide on domestic issues such as divorce and domestic violence, attempting to solve these problems within their own communities. In those cases in which the judicial committee failed to reach a solution acceptable to both parties, the matter was put before representatives of the Thai MOI, who rendered a final adjudication. It was reported that some women who had been divorced in this way felt the MOI made decisions in a manner of greater fairness than the refugees' own judicial committee, members of which tended either to tell a women to remain married to an abusive husband or to accept a divorce without retaining custody of her children.

women. In those sections of the camp reserved for Hmong, Mien, and Htin women, there were no such groups; nor were there any such groups at all in Chieng Kham.

The aforementioned officers of UNHCR, as well as members of a variety of NGOs, constituted a constant presence in both camps. In Napho camp, there were twelve NGOs represented, while seven NGOs maintained members in Chieng Kham. These NGO members oversaw the provision of such services as sanitation, water supply, site maintenance, health education, opium detoxification and rehabilitation, family planning and counseling, and skills training programs – the latter including education in carpentry, electrical appliance and radio repair, sewing, bicycle and motorcycle repair, welding, silk screening, mat and basket weaving, metalwork, clerical skills, typing, and agriculture. In Chieng Kham, there was also a center of traditional medicine (UNHCR Briefing Papers, 1992, and CCSDPT, 1986).

Shifts in the Nature of Gender Roles

Most of the NGO officers were foreigners who answered to foreign directors, the latter being overwhelmingly either Americans or Europeans. Lower echelon NGO staff, meanwhile, were Thai nationals exclusively, and each NGO employed a number of refugees to assist with various camp functions. Nevertheless, very few refugee women occupied these positions. In fact, very few refugee women even sought to avail themselves of the services provided. Although NGO personnel attempted to encourage female participation in available programs, such efforts met with little enthusiasm among the target female population. To a large extent, this was due to the fact that, as a matter of policy, these same NGO personnel actively supported the idea of "preservation of traditional culture." That is, they supported those traditions by which, for countless generations, women had been restricted from participation in their societies' institutions in any but the most circumscribed of roles. Moreover, inasmuch as the administrators and various other functionaries with whom these women interacted were almost exclusively men, who could be depended upon to strive at every turn to preserve the power and authority which had ever been their perquisites in a traditional, male dominated culture, any policy on the part of NGO representatives which fostered the conservation of the status quo served, even if indirectly,

to militate against the participation of women in the organizational structures of camp life. In this manner, camp policy was directed, albeit inadvertently, toward a regressive reversal of the sorts of social change that the shifting currents of contemporary history had, in fact, already effected throughout the industrialized world. Nevertheless, and as will be seen, in the wake of the refugee exodus from Laos gender roles had, in fact, shifted dramatically.

In any case, these efforts of NGO representatives to preserve cultural institutions may be likened, to some extent, to the proverbial effort to "put the toothpaste back in the tube." Nonetheless, we may with some justification ask whether, and to what extent, camp culture – for all its shifting political and social currents – may be considered traditionally Hmong or traditionally Lao Lum. In this context, it may be instructive to apply criteria discussed in Mary Anderson's booklet "A Framework for People-Oriented Planning in Refugee Situations."

Anderson writes, "One critical variable in program planning is change in the gender division of roles, responsibilities and resources." She goes on to say, "Because the society is in transition, traditional roles may no longer apply. Find out from the refugees, both men and women, how their roles have changed and are changing" (Anderson 1992). Consonant with such suggestions, and in an attempt to understand the gradual shift in gender roles among the refugees of Chieng Kham and Napho camps, household work patterns and the allocation of responsibilities and resources were examined. The results of this examination highlight significant changes in patterns of responsibility and status as manifested between the sexes.

Another authority, Holly Ann Williams, posits, in her article "Families in Refugee Camps," that, "as a general rule, refugee family structures will already have begun to alter prior to any escape from the country of origin" (Williams 1990: 100). It is the contention of the author, in fact, that this may be said of both the Hmong and the Lao Lum populations. Indeed, that aspect of the Vietnam War which occurred in Laos (sometimes referred to as The Secret War), had already caused changes in traditional Hmong and in traditional Lao Lum culture before the exodus of refugees to Thailand.

Before the war, for example, both men and women worked to raise domesticated animals; before the war, both men and women worked the fields to raise corn, garden vegetables, and rice. Such practices relative to traditional subsistence altered during the war, however, as the nature of activity shifted to meet the requirements of what was increasingly a cash economy. With men enlisting in ever-increasing numbers in exchange for cash wages, the male became the main source of income. Even as the men were away in battle, many women were forced by the hostilities to move constantly from place to place with their children and the elderly in tow. This movement restricted the extent to which the female could engage in agricultural activities, thus accelerating what was already a significant dependency on the mercenary wages of male family members. Many men, as well, became increasingly preoccupied with the give and take of membership in an array of political factions and with the political condition of the nation. While such new involvement bestowed prestige, political power, and authority upon the male, the female was left with all the burdens involved in family care. In this manner, the cares and responsibilities with which women were forced to deal increased incrementally at precisely the time they found the erstwhile stability of their social institutions considerably diminished, not to mention the emotionally reassuring presence of their husbands. That this was a tremendous strain goes without saying; in addition, however, it served gradually to lower the woman's status and self-esteem as she passed from the role of active partner in family maintenance to a marginalized figure in an increasingly political landscape in which cash, rather than labor per se, was the valued currency.

Shifts in the Nature of Camp Activity

The many changes in ancient traditions necessitated by the exigencies of camp life were by no means all unwelcome to the women residents. As but one example, women were no longer forced to move constantly; indeed, they could not. Women were, as well, freed from many of the labor-intensive duties routine in the traditional setting. These included the clearing of land – an activity of particular importance for upland farmers; the collection of thatch, bamboo and other housing materials; planting and weeding staple crops; the harvesting and threshing of rice; rice pounding; feeding livestock; gardening; fetching firewood; and foraging for wild vegetables (Chagnon 1992). In both the camps and in Laos,

women and girls were, by tradition, sent to fetch water for one to three hours each day; in the camps, however, a system of pushcarts and twenty-liter jugs had, to some extent, replaced the more traditional system of water delivery, which consisted of a bamboo tube carried on the back, or twin buckets slung on the ends of a pole. This change in the method of water delivery alone had made the duties of women far less onerous. Moreover, in the camps men and boys helped collect water, too. This allowed women more time for activities related to the generation of income – activities necessitated by the increasing involvement in and dependence upon a cash economy. To the extent that the organizations which oversaw camp life had begun to assist in providing for some of the basic human needs of the family, these organizations, too, lifted burdens from the shoulders of women and freed up their time and energy for other things.¹¹

With the time and energy thus furnished them, most refugee women took up activities calculated to provide the economic wherewithal to mitigate deficiencies in the family larder. Such activities as, e.g., embroidery, weaving, sewing, marketing, silversmithing, and basketry became very popular undertakings. Indeed, with the onset of the war years and the resulting transition from a barter to a cash economy, most women had grown accustomed to the idea of a shift in the nature of their proper role from that of subsistence rice farmer to that of craftsperson and entrepreneur, and this shift had, if anything, accelerated in the camps. This role had, in fact, become more important than before, in that the family's survival and the family's material comfort depended to an ever-increasing extent on the availability of the cash necessary to supplement the always inadequate supplies furnished by camp authorities. In sum, then, women were no longer forced to engage in many of the most difficult and strenuous activities of the farm setting of Laos, and were growing accustomed to the fact that their new freedoms were not only pleasant, they were increasingly necessary to the well-being and even the survival of the family unit. This was to

¹¹ The term "basic needs," as it was employed in the camp context, referred to the provision of food, firewood, water, and medical supplies. On purely semantic grounds, it is widely assumed that this supply was sufficient to meet the "basic" requirements of a family; this was, in fact, not the case. Refugees received just enough rice to last until the following distribution date, but quantities of meat and vegetables were never adequate. It was for this reason, as much as any other, that refugee women undertook to earn extra money – money which was largely spent on food.

be a precursor to the sort of liberating change which would be encountered in an even more pronounced form in the new life of the immigrant West.

These changes being wrought in camp life affected men no less than women, for in a family setting the roles played by either gender are inextricably interwoven. In the traditional setting of Laos, Hmong men had largely engaged in farming, fishing, hunting, and soldiering. In camp, none of these was any longer possible. Some men had adapted, taking up a new career more suited to the camp environment, with its shifting gender roles and its cash economy, and such activities as jewelry making, blacksmithing, and basket weaving were not uncommon.

These were, of necessity, all small-scale ventures. As an example of the income provided by such activities, it can be stated that, in the late 1980's, many Lao Lum men and women in Napho camp took up silversmithing and were enabled thereby to earn in the neighborhood of US \$40 to US \$50 per month. Some camp males were also able to take up work in camp services, for which they were compensated with small allotments of goods.¹² A few men had taken up such occupations – traditionally designated "women's work" – such as sewing, tailoring, and food marketing. Yet, if these activities yielded small economic return, the political and social significance of the shift they represented was great. In the camps, Hmong and Lao Lum men were no longer able to provide even fifty percent of their families' basic needs. Rather, and via the mechanism of their work with the crafts of embroidery and weaving, refugee women had largely become the primary source of family cash income.

Thus it was that the stage was set for the kinds of alterations in gender roles which were to gain currency and speed as traditional ways confronted the modern world. Men and boys were increasingly fetching water and caring for children – chores which had previously been allocated to women – while the

¹² Although these refugees worked full-time for the organizations and officials charged with the provision of camp services, the refugees received the very nominal monthly compensation of an incentive packet containing shampoo, toothpaste, soap, and detergent. The packet had an approximate retail value of US \$4.00, and no cash was paid these workers.

women worked to provide family income. In this way, the nature of contemporary life came upon the Hmong.

Shifts in the Nature of Gender Status

The shifts in gender roles and relationships were yet more far-reaching. Even before the inception of what had become largely a cash economy, there had been the utilization of cash as a medium of Hmong trade in Laos. This utilization had, admittedly, been on a small scale; nevertheless, and perhaps because of its small scale, the management of small stocks of cash had been an important aspect of family life. By tradition, it was the husband who presided over such considerations as the disposition of such family savings as might accrue, and whether or not the wife, or wives, would share any involvement in financial decisions. Within the Hmong population of the refugee camps, such authority had gradually come to be shared, and, as in so many other aspects of this new life, Hmong women were playing a larger and a far more active role. Within the Lao Lum families, by contrast, financial control had, by tradition, always been a "fifty-fifty" proposition, and this shared control over family financial and other decisions had not been altered by camp life. Thus it was that, in the camps of Thailand, refugee women held the reins of a very real financial power.

Yet, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, this position vis a vis financial authority did not automatically generate an enhanced social situation for refugee women; barring the way were hundreds of years of custom and tradition which tended to enforce social stasis. For millennia, both Lao Lum and Hmong men had regarded themselves as superior to their women in dealing with public affairs, in communicating with outsiders, and in handling material considerations relative to family requirements; what amounted to a few years – in historical terms – of social dislocation was not going to change what most of those concerned (and certainly most men) considered to be the essential nature of life on earth.

Even during this period of immense social transition, then, it was clear that Lao and Hmong women had not yet come to recognize their stronger political position and could be seen almost invariably to revert to a submissive posture in their dealings with men in such matters. This posture began to

pervade, and had a corrosive effect upon, the community, so that even the relatively strong and educated woman would, perforce, come to accept a belief in her own inferiority.

As an example, we may cite a meeting with a Lao Lum woman who had been a third-year university student when she left Laos; who worked for several NGOs in Napho camp; and who further proved her intelligence, her ambition, her personal drive – and her business acumen – by running a noodle shop in Napho. When asked for her thoughts on why there had been no women named to any of the various Lao refugee administrative committees, she answered, "Women don't have the ability. We're not educated. We don't have time. Our job is to look after our children and to earn money to feed them." When it was pointed out to her that she had more education, and might also have a good deal more ability, than most of the men in the camp, she smiled wryly and said, "They didn't ask any women to be on the committees, so what can we do? They don't encourage women like me to do such work; only my husband gets asked."

The statement of this woman – who is clearly an intelligent, educated, and a very able human being – serves perfectly to illustrate the obstacles to be overcome in modernizing traditions as these traditions impacted camp life. Despite the leading economic role of women in the camps, a role which led directly to the possibility of an enhanced political power if only the women had insisted upon it, women continued to remain largely sidelined in most of the significant social activities outside the home. In short, despite their heightened earning power, their social status remained largely as before.

This is not to say that refugee women were complacent, or that they accepted the situation with indifference. In fact, there was considerable frustration, if not outrage. Yet, with little outlet for such feelings, and, one might add, little interest in these feelings either among the male population or among any of the representatives of the Thai or international organizations, such feelings were, to a large extent, stifled. In the circumstances, deprived of material necessities – and even basic rights – and forced to keep intense emotions to themselves, it is perhaps not surprising that these women could often be found clinging to memories of the older, "halcyon days" of former times – times which were, after all,

characterized by strict adherence to traditional ways of life.¹³ It is ironic to note that this very nostalgia for the past, created by the absence of social and political influence available to them in camp, led refugee women into a sort of "vicious circle" by which they came to recall wistfully an idealized past – a past in which their lives had been characterized by an absence of social and political influence!

Yet, this was not entirely negative, for ultimately, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, it provided for the preservation of much that was beautiful and noble in Hmong tradition. As this situation played itself out, the concentration of so many Hmong in such a confined space, with so much of traditional knowledge available inside its precincts, created, in essence, a de facto "university" of Hmong folkways, and led to what might even be termed a renaissance of Hmong lore and Hmong custom. Hmong arts and crafts, Hmong medical and herbal lore, traditional Hmong storytelling skills, and many other timeless aspects of Hmong life were well-represented and well-maintained in the refugee camps of Thailand. And yet, it was, at the same time, undeniable that tradition in this context translated into the preservation of the longstanding dominant, i.e. male, position in refugee society, and it bears repeating that the development programs instituted in this refugee society excluded women and thereby served only half of the adult population. It is, then, without resort to rhetorical excess that one may assert it was past time for the latent political gains made by Hmong women to be recognized in patent social change.

Additional Concerns of Gender

The foregoing amply illustrates that, while traditional gender roles had changed tremendously in the refugee camps, nonetheless this change had been slow in transforming the role of women. It had, indeed, been slow even to transform opinions about that role – at least among the population of male refugees and that of the representatives of the various organizations charged with oversight of camp life. Refugee women, on the other hand, had begun to take note of a gradual shift in their potential influence.

¹³ Denial of basic rights in this context refers to a set of several restrictions placed by authorities on refugees. Under most circumstances, refugees were not allowed out of camp. Thus, their economic situation could not be mitigated by any element of free trade exercised in nearby residential areas. Indeed, they could sell their prepared foods or stitchery items only at a central market, for which privilege they were required to pay a "table fee," the expense of which generally made the project unprofitable. Moreover, any such commercial activities were subject to a 10:00 PM curfew.

Moreover, numerous interviews with these women indicated that Hmong women held to a significantly different set of concerns than did the men. As one very common example, most Hmong men tended to concern themselves with the possibility of repatriation and resettlement, and much of their conversation reflected this concern. In these conversations, considerations of the best means by which to maintain cultural identity and political sovereignty came generally to the fore, and it was in the consideration of cultural identity and political sovereignty that there emerged a powerful desire to preserve such male-dominant cultural practices as polygyny and those involved in certain aspects of burial ritual. In their discussions of emigration and resettlement to new nations, these men expressed such anxieties relative to power over "their" women as, e.g., that the women would slip into affairs with American men; they would abandon their husbands and children; that they would call police to intervene in domestic disputes, and so on. As they weighed their options, these same men expressed no such concerns about potential female anxieties.

As he assessed the possibilities inherent in repatriation, the Hmong male worried, also, that he might be arrested and punished, or even killed, by the Lao government – yet he invariably offered a cavalier dismissal of possible consequences to the women and children for whose welfare he was responsible. While some men even ventured to speculate on the possibility of becoming a village headman if repatriation were effected – an achievement within the reach of many – all recognized that to become a governor of, or even a councilman in, an American city, even in an American city with a relatively large Hmong voter bloc, was highly unlikely. As such pleasant political fancies were bandied about among the Hmong refugee male population, the wishes and aspirations of the Hmong female were a matter of little or no concern.

For the Hmong woman, meanwhile, such political glories were a matter of indifference. For the Hmong woman, rather, the highest priority in life tended to be the improvement of the quality of life for herself and her children. Indeed, for many of these Hmong women, repatriation equated with the institution of polygyny and such other institutions of Hmong life in Laos as upland rice farming, rice pounding, the manual transport of water, and the cultivation of opium. By contrast, the same women

considered it likely that resettlement in America equated with freedom from most or all of these onerous tasks. Yes, she might have to work hard; but the work would not be outdoors in sun and rain, and the rewards would be infinitely greater. Safety concerns were also a factor, and the Hmong female realized that life in America, for all its uncertainty, was almost certain to be less hazardous than the outdoors life of the highlands. When the natural hazards of this highland life were magnified many fold by the possibility of arrest and even execution of family members as a result of internal Lao hostilities, enthusiasm for resettlement greatly increased. It must be remembered, too, that, in the event of a husband's arrest in Laos, a wife would be left to care for the children alone; also to be considered was the pain and anxiety inherent in endless worry over where it was that a husband, son, brother, or father had been taken, and even whether or not the loved one remained alive. While UNHCR, as well as both the Thai and Lao governments, constantly insisted that such arrests and disappearances were no longer a feature of life inside Laos, Hmong women in camp continued to assert that, in reality, such episodes, though they might be rare, did continue to occur. All these factors constituted additional incentive to press for resettlement in the United States.

Enter a Hmong-American Woman Anthropologist

The preceding sections delineate changes in gender roles that evolved during the course of life in the refugee camps of Thailand, and which could even, to some extent, trace their origins to life in war-torn Laos. As time passed, and social and economic pressures became both inexorable and irresistible, the changes became more pronounced and more evident despite the fact that the refugee male continued to attempt, as best he could, to cling to his traditional way of life; a way of life in which he had, for millennia, been the dominant force and by which he had enjoyed great status and enormous privileges and prerogatives. Returning to such a way of life, however, was increasingly becoming an unrealistic dream, and, as reality gradually intruded upon this dream, consideration of the twin themes of cultural preservation and political action was often employed as a balm to the male ego and a means by which to maintain a dominant role in camp life. Absorption in discussions of political action and cultural

preservation also provided an effective, if spurious, mechanism by which to avoid serious dealings with the priorities and desires of the refugee female.

This was the social environment which existed in the camps at the time the author, a Hmong-American female anthropologist, arrived; and it was the social environment which existed in the camps throughout the period during which research was conducted. In such an environment, it was perhaps inevitable that the gender-based ambiguity in the nature of roles and the allocation of responsibilities that existed between the refugee male and the refugee female would impact the author's efforts to gather information and generate a report. In addition, the author's efforts were rendered additionally problematic by the realization, achieved very shortly after she commenced her investigations, that virtually all those in the camps – ranging from refugees to Thai nationals to Westerners – had formed preconceptions about her in a matter of a few days. Before she could make an appreciable start, indeed, rumors began to circulate that – as a Hmong woman refugee herself, who had taken her destiny in hand to launch a career in the West – she might behave as a Western feminist, create social unrest, or generate other such divisive influences as might be considered consonant with certain varieties of modern sociopolitical agitation. To maintain an awareness of these various preconceptions and factor them into research results was not always an easy task, and considerable thought and effort was expended in just such an effort.

It was, to say the least, an awkward position. On the one hand, the author was, as has been noted, a Hmong refugee woman who had spent years of her early life in similar camps. On the other hand, she was also now a Westerner with a Western education, who had grown accustomed to all the freedom of thought and action accorded women in the West. Such a background might, so it was thought, be considered a passport to deeper understanding of both sides; or it might be considered a hybrid position from which neither side could be correctly perceived. It therefore became necessary, at an early stage, not merely to commence research, but to establish a basis for faith in the methods and results of any such research.

It should be remembered that, as was the case with other non-refugees working in the camp setting, it was the author's motive to ameliorate to some extent the difficulties inherent to camp life, most

particularly among refugee women. Certainly this implied that change would occur as a result of the author's presence, and the author was aware – even at an early stage – that such change was likely. For example, in singling out refugee women as the target population for any study, a level of significance was assigned to them in excess of that assigned to refugee men; of necessity a fact which could not but add, if only marginally, to the social forces encouraging a departure from traditional roles and expectations. Yet, it was hoped it might be possible – and ways were actively sought – to minimize this change, and ways were explored by which to balance tensions extant between those refugee women with whom the author came into contact and the refugee men with whom they were involved. These efforts were sometimes more successful, sometimes less so, and, as a refugee woman herself, who had traveled a path of change similar to that upon which many other refugee women had since begun to tread, it was perhaps inevitable that the author would perceive herself to some extent as a kind of midwife for the burgeoning freedoms which had begun to accrue to the women of the camps. To balance this perception with the necessity to attempt to preserve professional objectivity was not always an easy task, and the author would occasionally come to perceive herself at various junctures more as a Hmong woman, more as a refugee, or more as a Western scholar.

Refugee Perceptions of the Author

As the preceding section will serve to indicate, because the author was a Hmong-American, those refugees with whom she interacted often came to perceive her in a manner different from that in which she was perceived by the Thai nationals and the Westerners present in camp or, indeed, herself. On the one hand, she had, at one time, herself endured experiences comparable to those of the refugee women, and this meant that she might be expected to achieve a greater level of understanding about their condition than other staff members and even refugee males. This had the advantage for research purposes that, having been born and raised in circumstances similar to their own, many refugees were quite open in their discussions with her. This was also, however, the proverbial "two-edged sword," in that many refugees came to expect, as a result of the special relationships engendered, the author's help with a variety of difficulties great and small. Many came to feel the author could be counted upon to consider all

matters presented to her as a friend and advocate and – particularly in cases involving refugees in relatively desperate situations – even to solve their problems for them. In many cases, the author came to be viewed not as a researcher, but, rather, as a sort of Big Sister; even a parent. Some refugees came to feel that the author, fluent in English and thus able to communicate with camp authorities, might assist in a change from non-refugee to refugee status and, in this way, render them eligible for resettlement in the US.¹⁴

At all events, in the course of her research it became clear to the author that large numbers of Hmong and Lao refugee women professed a desire to be in a position comparable to that of the author – educated, socially mobile, and able to travel anywhere. Some of these women evinced amazement at the author's status, saying they had never before considered that a Hmong-Lao woman might achieve what the author had achieved and do what the author did, i.e., obtain an advanced degree from a Western university and travel alone to work among men and foreigners. Conversations with respect to such topics fostered a certain regret in the author over her inability to offer assistance, and it sometimes became difficult to maintain scholarly distance in such cases.

Ironically, before beginning research in the camps, service personnel had warned that it was a matter of some difficulty to breach the gap between interviewer and interviewee. These service providers attributed this difficulty to a lack of motivation on the part of refugee women to do so, coupled with gender, cultural, and language barriers. Seeing that these women were not participating in any of the training or service programs in the camps, and attributing this to a general indifference to their fate, the service workers wondered aloud how it might be possible to establish meaningful contact with women so thoroughly resolved to the acceptance of whatever came their way. Although it has been seen that

¹⁴ Prior to 1985, all who escaped from Laos to Thailand were considered to be refugees and were referred to as such. In 1985, however, a screening program was established to determine the status of each individual on a case-by-case basis. As a result, all those "seeking political asylum" were required to demonstrate a "well-founded fear of persecution" at the hands of the Lao government. Failing to do so to demonstrate, the individual was considered to be a "seeker of economic asylum," fleeing the homeland solely in search of a more comfortable future. Such people were given non-refugee status. Those "screened out" in this process were required to return to Laos; those "screened in" were considered to be refugees, and thus eligible for resettlement in a third country.

"breaching the gap" between interviewer and interviewee was not a problem – rather the reverse, if anything – the author's initial trepidation over this perceived difficulty led her to take a somewhat different approach than had been taken previously. Of the opinion that some, at least, of the seeming reluctance of refugee women to actively engage their situation might be due more to social sanctions than indifference, the author obtained a list of refugees planning to repatriate to Laos from UNHCR, and these refugees were visited in their homes. Initially, conversations were held only with concerned males – husbands, fathers, and/or other male relatives – who were informed of the planned research. These males were then permitted to ask as many questions as desired before the request was made for an interview with any woman. This new approach was singularly effective; after the initial introduction, all those males approached by the author granted access to family females. As expected, the majority of the women to whom access was thus obtained stated they had never before had any chance to share their views, as well as their belief that the opportunity to do so signaled their importance. These refugee females were then found most eager to talk in an open manner.

Another factor in establishing the success of the interview process was the author's approach to these women; that is, as an equal – as one Hmong woman to another. This approach rendered conversations at least nominally a channel of equal exchange rather than, strictly speaking, a mere interview. The refugee women approached in this way were fascinated with stories of life outside the camps, such as, e.g. those of the author's life in a Hmong or Thai village; of life as a Hmong refugee in the United States; those of travel around the world; and those of international service work. If time had permitted, indeed, many of these conversations might have lasted for days; as it happened, at least one-third of the allotted time in the camps was spent in such informal conversations with refugee women – in the streets, in homes, or in the office.

Throughout, these refugees, both women and men, manifested considerable respect in all their dealings with the author; yet there were, nevertheless, occasional problems. A variety of factors came into play, with, perhaps, the factor of greatest significance being the author's unmarried status. Tradition, as in so many aspects of camp life, here played a major role as it intersected with certain aspects of the

Hmong language. An unmarried adult Hmong woman is a rarity, and this, coupled with the fact that it is a characteristic of the Hmong language that personal pronouns in matters of address are largely geared to kin relationships, created something of a problem. During initial meetings with the author, interviewees tended largely to assume the existence of a spouse, and the first question asked by all was the name of this spouse. This is not considered intrusive in Hmong tradition; rather, it is a sincere effort to establish the nature of the form of address which is to be employed in future conversations. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the author was unmarried, this tradition made for an awkward moment at the beginning of nearly every interview.

Another gender-based difficulty faced by the author was more significant. This developed in March, 1992, when three refugee political leaders were removed from Chieng Kham camp due to involvement with resistance groups within Laos. The male relatives of these men sought an explanation from officials both of the Thai MOI and from UNHCR and were given a specious rationale. Casting about for someone to blame, these relatives settled upon the author, believing her, so it seemed, a sort of "spy" or secret agent working on behalf of the Lao government. In an attempt to develop a course of action which might, so they hoped, rectify the wrong they believed had been done, the men approached a male relative of the author, also in camp at that time, to conduct an informal investigation. The relative, unable to answer all questions put to him, entered into an agreement to gather more information. Thus it was that the author was requested to write out a list of all sources of funding, together with a list of those organizations which had sponsored her research. Although this subterfuge on the part of the resistance leaders' relatives was not quite on the level of a James Bond film, it was considerably less than direct; however, requests addressed to these resistance leaders' family members made by the aforementioned, sorely tried relative of the author to the effect that they should make their inquiries personally met with no response, and, in any case, the amateur sleuths soon ceased their investigations. In this fashion, it all ended in a more or less harmless manner; however, one was left to ponder what might have happened had the author's male relative not been present in camp.

At all events, the above episodes serve well to point up the manner in which Hmong men relate to – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say hopelessly fail to relate to – Hmong women, and other such incidents, of a considerably less amusing nature, can be detailed. In fact, there were other difficulties – not so much with Hmong males of an age comparable to that of the author, but with those Hmong males who were considerably younger. On many informal occasions which occurred with teenage males present, and most especially when no foreigner was in attendance, the author was treated in a manner similar to that in which such males relate to the young, single – and therefore eligible – Hmong female. Young, single, eligible Hmong women, without a male family member or spouse to defend them, are often, in Hmong society, considered "open to the public"; that is, they are considered to be available in much the same manner as available property that has not been claimed by an owner. The sort of attitude adopted by these young fellows was very nearly intolerable; and yet it was, in addition and at the same time, illuminating to experience yet another aspect of the life of refugee women. As a matter of old-country tradition, there was nothing wrong with what these young men said or with the attitude they demonstrated; nevertheless, as a woman exposed to the more liberal attitudes and modes of behavior prevalent in the West, it was both humiliating and degrading to be treated thus. It was, in addition, quite striking to realize that, in order to avoid such treatment, a Hmong woman must be married and "owned" by a man who had "staked his claim" to her as one would a possession. It can be seen that it is therefore, in some sense, axiomatic to Hmong tradition that a woman cannot own herself.

Certainly it is true that the author – being female and Hmong, while, at the same time, being bright, educated, empowered, and in command of her own destiny – was an anomaly to Hmong men. Indeed, since none of the Hmong men encountered had met such a Hmong woman before, most gave every evidence that they simply had no idea what sort of social protocols to follow. It sent a powerful message to these men that most NGO directors demonstrated an attitude of respect toward the author, treating her as an equal. At the same time, and in the absence of any established set of social rules to be observed in such dealings, the author, too, found herself, at times, at a loss with respect to interactions with the Hmong male, particularly the older Hmong male in a position of leadership.

Yet, all such incidents took place during the more informal occasions encountered, and it should be added quickly that, on formal occasions, the author was treated with deference and respect; certainly in a manner very different than that in which other Hmong women were treated. As witness to this fact, it is possible to cite several instances of Hmong holiday feasts in which the author was invited to take part. By custom, it is the men who eat first at such affairs. Only after the men have finished is it that the women - who do most of the food preparation - are permitted to dine, and most of the time there is very little food left. During the aforementioned feasts, however, the author was asked to dine *with* the men, often as the only woman sitting among them. Despite the author's efforts to encourage other women present to join in, they refused; the men, not surprisingly, made no move to encourage them to do so.

UNHCR Staff Perceptions of the Author

Because this research project was funded by a branch of the United Nations, on-site representatives of UNHCR tended to be very cooperative in assisting with the achievement of research goals. Before going to Thailand, contact had been made with a Canadian woman widely considered one of the most important people in the Geneva system of UNHCR. This woman was informed of the project and was asked for assistance. Accordingly, she, in turn, informed the appropriate representatives of UNHCR in Bangkok, requesting they manifest all possible cooperation upon the author's arrival. In conformity with this request, officials of the UNHCR Bangkok Branch Office had a refugee camp pass ready, and informed their field office in Chiang Kham of the nature of the research to be undertaken. It was later learned that the head of this Chiang Kham office had been very resistant to the conduct of this research, and particularly to the ethnicity and gender of the author. Inasmuch as there had been support from staff in Geneva, however, this individual's attempted interdiction had been foiled.

The rationale for this resistance was somewhat tortuous. The objecting official was also an anthropologist, and had achieved a reputation as *the* expert nonpareil on Hmong culture. It was his belief, apparently, that he knew everything to be known about the Hmong and had therefore assured himself that the discovery of any information unknown to him was not to be anticipated. Perhaps, also, he feared that any new discoveries might put his self-esteem to the test. Nevertheless, and to his credit, as he monitored

the daily progress of the research he came to respect the author's work, and it must be admitted that, by the time of the project's termination, he and the author had become good friends.

It must be stated, however, that this individual was widely disliked by representatives of the various NGOs on site. Operating under very different organizational standards, and according to very different organization guidelines, than representatives of the UN, these NGO representatives had widely differing philosophies with respect to goals, and there existed a palpable tension between UNHCR personnel and NGO personnel. It was not unrelated that refugees tended sometimes to be highly mistrustful of UNHCR, so that, in order to successfully achieve project ends, it became prudent to maintain a discreet distance from that organization lest this mistrust color refugee attitudes toward the author. Thus, the UNHCR hat might be donned when the authority was required in the pursuit of research; in other instances, the useful fiction was maintained that the author was an independent researcher unassociated with UNHCR or any of the NGOs in camp, and this helped greatly in rendering interviewees more open in the expression of feelings and concerns.

NGO Staff Perceptions of the Author

The reluctance of the refugee female to be interviewed has been noted; a significant factor contributing to the resulting under-representation of refugee female participants in camp research was the set of obstacles uniquely faced by foreigners who, on the one hand, attempted to honor the paradigms of refugee culture and, accordingly, considered it intrusive to encourage women to step out of their traditional roles; yet who, on the other hand, simply could not gain access to refugee women due to cultural and language barriers.

All of that notwithstanding, because the author was a Hmong woman who had, herself, lived in a refugee camp at one time, the majority of NGO representatives expressed high hopes that additional, previously unavailable, information might be solicited from refugee women. These representatives were therefore very supportive of the research goals and exerted themselves wholeheartedly to be of assistance. At the same time, there were evident reservations among some Western NGO directors who, apparently, considered it likely that, being a Hmong-American woman trained in the West, the author might comport

herself as a Western feminist – not only attempting to impose her own values and views on the women of the camps, but also attempting to stimulate controversy on a variety of social and political issues, the ultimate result of which would be to make their work more difficult than otherwise. Some of these directors expressly cautioned the author not to assist the refugees, lest such assistance step on the toes of others present in the camps. Still others expressly voiced the expectation that all research findings – indeed, all information of any sort whatsoever – would, without question or demur, be shared with them.

The Author Reflects

In considering her role in this project, the author came to see herself as a figure who, much of the time, acted as an intermediary between a great many opposing forces, and who, accordingly, was required to wear play many roles. One of these roles was that of fellow Hmong refugee, sharing similar experiences and common values with camp residents. Such values included the recognition that, although the current Lao government had altered its policies considerably to accommodate itself to modern standards and norms of conduct with respect to human rights, nevertheless it continued to violate those same standards with alarming regularity. These violations included the imprisonment of former government officials without trial, in some cases for terms of over ten years. Such values also included the belief that the Lao government did not, in fact, wish the repatriation of refugees, but, due to international pressure, nevertheless continued to make a political gesture by accepting them. The ostensibly shared set of beliefs and values included, as well, the consideration that, although the Lao government had made it a policy to discourage discrimination inside Laos, in practice discrimination was still widely practiced by the Lao Lum against the Hmong and other ethnic groups in Laos. In addition, this set of shared considerations included a concern on the part of refugee women that, upon return to Laos, all returnees would be tarred with the brush of the resistance in which only some returnees were involved; this, they feared, would result in the indiscriminate arrest of returnee males, with all of the attendant emotional and material hardship to returnee females.

In contrast to these refugee women, however, who, after all, had no citizenship affiliation, the author was indisputably an American citizen, with all the security and socioeconomic opportunity that

implies. In a very real sense, then, the author had transcended the refugee experience with her move to another continent, another culture, and other educational and social systems. She had traveled to many countries and been exposed to new ideas, cultural practices, and belief systems. In fact, the author no longer subscribed to many values held by the refugees. Refugee men, for example, hold as an axiom of their culture that women are inherently inferior and therefore worthy of no more than inferior social status. Women, so they believe, are incapable of participation in public affairs and unable, by nature, to make major decisions. Refugee women, for their part, have, for countless ages, been indoctrinated in this tenet of inferiority, and thus generally consider themselves unworthy to perform many of the basic functions of daily life. Having heard this all their lives, these women have come to accept this postulate as fact, accepting the label of inferiority and seeing no alternative to such a situation.

The author, on the other hand – and based upon a not inconsiderable experience of contemporary life – believes women to be as capable as men of participation in public affairs. To achieve such an end, so the author considered, it was only necessary to alter the posture of false inferiority adopted by these women, support them in their new-found status, and inculcate in them an understanding of the concepts and institutions with which they might be expected to deal. In opposition, then, to the views held by many refugees, who considered that traditional culture had, by necessity, to remain unchanged, the author viewed change as being very often positive. Finally, as distinct from the views held by many refugees, the author has, throughout her life, been in favor of peaceful change in government, rather than change through violence; and in favor only of voluntary repatriation.

A Western Scholar

One factor that set the author apart from other Hmong women – and from and other refugees generally – and established a degree of commonality with fellow NGO and UNHCR workers, was her professional credibility in Western terms. She was, after all, an anthropologist, trained and educated in a system similar to that of most Westerners working in the camps. In common with most of these outsiders, the author had a home and a country to which to return. Another value held in common with NGO workers was an overriding concern both for peace and for humanitarian care.

However, it should also be noted that the author had certain perceptions at variance with those of her fellow UNHCR and NGO representatives. Unlike many, the author was against forced repatriation. Having worked closely with refugees and having enjoyed considerable confidence with respect to their personal communications, it was the author's belief that, although not everything said was to be accepted, nonetheless there was a considerable and warranted fear for life and safety should repatriation to Laos occur. Until this fear had been convincingly allayed, refugees, by and large, would not willingly return. Many representatives of UNHCR and NGOs, meanwhile, considered that refugees simply wished to remain in camp for personal reasons, so that these refugees actively manipulated unfounded concerns in furtherance of this desire.

At variance, too, was the author's conviction that both refugee women and refugee men should be included as members of those groups searching for solutions to refugee problems. While research was being conducted for this project, NGO staff met once each month in Chieng Kham camp to discuss programs; no refugee was ever invited to participate in any of these discussions. Every year, representatives of UNHCR, together with officials of the Lao and Thai governments, held a tripartite meeting to seek solutions to refugee problems; no refugee leader was ever allowed to attend any of these meetings. Refugees, indeed, were expected simply to accept what had been decided on their behalf, and to issue no protest at what was allotted them. Any reluctance was ignored, despite a considerable, and obvious, gap between what the refugees considered to be their problems and what camp authorities considered such problems to be.

This variance in opinions should not be construed as a condemnation of camp authorities; far from it. One felt constrained, in fact, to feel great empathy for these authorities, who, with the best of intentions, worked so hard to find a "durable solution" to the seemingly intractable difficulties of the refugee conundrum. At the same time, however, it is easy to understand why refugees often felt reluctant to accept their lot, or declined to do so. From the refugee perspective, it often seemed that camp authorities were excessively peremptory in the imposition of conditions and regulations. After all, so the refugee argument went, it was they, themselves, who had to live in the camps or live in Laos, not the

authorities. The authorities, it was argued – and not without merit – would return to the comfort and safety of their homes once they had successfully persuaded the refugees to repatriate to a Laos in which prevailed conditions of the greatest possible uncertainty.

Insider vs. Outsider

In the final analysis, there can be little doubt that the author's personal and professional education, coupled with her experience as a Hmong American woman anthropologist, helped her to achieve unique insights. As an anthropologist, the author had been trained to be sensitive, non-judgmental, open-minded, respectful of other people's views, empathetic, and to examine things from a holistic perspective. In addition, this training had enabled the author to examine camp residents and camp organizations from an outsider's point of view, even as her life experiences had enabled the author, with an insider's view, to understand, and to empathize with, camp residents and to weigh the varying effects of the many camp organizations as these organizations impacted the lives of the refugees themselves. As a Hmong-American woman, meanwhile, already fluent in the Hmong language, it was a simple matter for the author to establish relationships with Hmong female refugees once access was gained. Being acculturated with a set of beliefs and values similar to those of her informants, and having a general knowledge of Hmong social structures, traditions, and gender roles, the author had been trained throughout childhood in just the sorts of situational ethics which allowed an understanding of the circumstances in which it was considered appropriate to ask questions – and, just as importantly, when it was not appropriate. As a member of the scholarly community, the importance of establishing a "Who's Who" of the Hmong political arena was clearly evident; as a member of the Hmong community it was clearly possible. While it is true that this dual perspective yielded two very different pictures, their synthesis formed a broadened view available to few others.

All of the foregoing, then, helped the author to see through and to analyze the camp situation more thoroughly than might otherwise had been the case, while at the same time providing a unique combination of insider's and outsider's views. Such a view would have been very difficult for another

researcher to replicate, and without a set of abilities comparable to those mentioned above, a comparable depth of information and understanding could not have been expected.

In evidence of this proposition, it may be stated that, on one occasion, the author visited a camp in the company of a Norwegian woman who worked as a representative of UNHCR. A day was spent on a guided tour of the camp precincts, during which the guide, a local UNHCR staff member, together with a young Hmong man who constituted a fourth companion, conversed at length in the Thai language with the Norwegian representative. In fact, all present spoke Thai fluently, and yet, by the end of the day, neither the guide nor the Norwegian representative of UNHCR had learned anything about our refugee companion. The author, meanwhile, speaking with this fellow in Hmong throughout the day, had learned that his two uncles were resistance leaders in the camp, and that corruption was rife among leaders of the different camp resistance groups. In addition, great detail had been elicited about the impact of various camp policies and what the nature of refugee reaction to such policies had been.

Solutions

It can, with merit, be argued that the insights gleaned by the author as both insider and outsider might, with profit, be applied to the formulation of a methodology by which to effect the empowerment of refugee women. There are, essentially, two approaches to empowering women in the developing world: 1) the immediate, "sink or swim," integration of women into the mainstream of existing projects; and, 2) the creation of special projects for the assistance of women. Those who subscribe to the former approach believe that women should, from the beginning, be brought into any development or service project that targets the population as a whole. Proponents of this approach argue that creating, in isolation, special projects for women can never truly integrate women participants into the social mainstream. Those, on the other hand, who support the former view, viz., the creation of particular undertakings specifically targeting women alone, assert that projects so targeted are needed in order to furnish women the special training, guidance, and/or assistance required at the beginning stages of a new endeavor. This, so they say, is required in order to cultivate the knowledge, confidence, and experience necessary to participate in

any such program on the "level playing field" of a "man's world" (Anderson, 1992, and UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women, 1992).

UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Women strongly urges the former course, and the author tends to agree that, ideally, there should be no need to single out women for special consideration in project development. In a "real world setting," however, it must be considered that it would take Hmong and Lao women and men many years of exposure to current norms of gender sensitivity before such integration could occur in a natural and untroubled manner. It would also take a conscious and concerted effort on the part of foreign sponsors to encourage this sort of integration "right from the get-go"; that is, at the design phase of new projects. Thus it is the author's opinion that, for the time being, at least, the salutary effect of special programs aimed at the promotion of confidence in, and an enhanced awareness of, the woman's own potential cannot be dismissed.

As an illustration, in both Chieng Kham and Napho camps, many instances were noted in which both women and men were in attendance at a meeting or an orientation; on all such occasions, the men reflexively occupied positions at the center or in the front, while the women, just as reflexively, sat at the back or on the margins. As the meeting progressed, the males present spoke out freely, while the females remained silent in the background and rarely expressed an opinion even when encouraged by the meeting facilitator. In contrast, on those occasions when women met together without the presence of men, they spoke up vociferously – and all the more so when the meeting facilitator was also a woman fluent in the Hmong language.

An Ethical Dilemma

As research was completed and the project detailed herein came to an end, an ethical dilemma arose the nature of which serves well to highlight many of the points raised in this article and the resolution of which posed a considerable challenge. As the result of an interview with three women resident in the camp at Napho – women who had been denied refugee status and were thus faced with forcible repatriation to Laos – it was learned that the trio were in possession of sufficient evidence to indicate that they could claim a "well founded fear of persecution" upon any such repatriation. Thus,

according to UNHCR regulations, these woman should have been granted the sort of legitimate change of status which would have allowed them to decline this repatriation.

The author, accordingly, spoke to a UNHCR case worker in the matter, and it was discovered that important documents were missing from the files of the three women concerned. The case worker, in consequence, suggested that the documents, detailing the circumstances of the arrest of husbands in Laos, should be submitted to the UNHCR branch office in Bangkok. This was done, and the documents were duly submitted with a letter requesting a review of the case. In addition, a transcription of the interview between the three women and the author was included in the packet. Two weeks after the author's departure from Napho camp, the women's cases were reviewed. Subsequently, too, rumors of the episode spread quickly. In the event, many asylum seekers – who had already been screened out of eligibility – went to the UNHCR office in the camp and requested that *their* cases, too, be reviewed.

As may be imagined, this created something of a dilemma for UNHCR, and several UNHCR officials became quite incensed at the author's involvement. The author had, so it was said, exceeded research demands to become a refugee advocate, and the screening process – a highly politicized affair – should have been considered by her as being "off limits." The fallout from this awkward development was not without its adverse aspect, for, when the author returned from a trip to Laos expecting to travel to the refugee camp at Chieng Kham, the office of UNHCR in Bangkok refused to grant a camp pass. The author was thereafter barred from any further visits to Chieng Kham.¹⁵

This incident is instructive, touching, as it does, on the nature of the boundary between scholarly interviewer, friend, and legal advocate – a boundary much considered in the body of the article, above. In an examination of the incident, the question must be asked, "Where does one draw the line, and what might have been done differently in order to avoid this situation, so uncomfortable for all concerned?" Many alternatives suggest themselves, none entirely satisfactory. In retrospect, however, the actions

¹⁵ It seemed, after this incident, that UNHCR would never again allow access to the camps where this research project had been conducted. However, during a subsequent visit to Thailand to present research findings at a related conference, a director of one of the UNHCR offices in Napho camp offered permission to return after graduation – a considerable surprise.

taken by the author were in accord with the mandate of UNHCR: to fairly and impartially decide in matters of refugee repatriation. That UNHCR had failed to do so in this case, and that an outsider had presumed to suggest a correction, points rather to an inadequacy in UNHCR administration than to any personal failing on the part of the author. Indeed, the petition for review made on behalf of the three women who had been denied an appropriate and deserved refugee status was the ethical stance – a view later reinforced by additional imprisonment meted out to the husbands of the trio.

Conclusion

The author of this article has been at some pains to present a clear analysis of refugee camp culture, particularly as it either conformed to or contrasted with the traditional lifestyles of the Hmong, and of the Lao Lum, of Laos. What became apparent, as one investigated this culture with increasing depth, is that life in the refugee camps of Thailand represented neither traditional Hmong nor traditional Lao Lum societies, but was, in fact, a mix of old and new. It was a life of innovation made upon tradition; a life of change set as an overlay upon the written page of almost timeless tradition. This intermixture of old and new deeply affected all aspects of camp life, none more so than in relations between refugee camp women and refugee camp men – and of these relations, perhaps nothing was more indicative of the nature of the overall situation than the twin areas of camp service programs and eligibility for resettlement.

With regard to the former, NGO staff consistently viewed the dearth of female participants to be a consequence both of the strictures imposed by traditional culture and of the lack of interest in such camp service programs evinced by refugee women. By contrast, refugee women consistently averred that the scarcity of program participants was due to the fact that such programs offered them little by way of opportunities and rewards. In a synthesis of these opposing views, the author was of the opinion that it was the nature of camp life – reinforcing, as it did, gender-based and restrictive cultural traditions – which, ironically, minimized female participation in what might otherwise have been liberating educational and social opportunities. In a classic "vicious circle," those officials arranging such programs

could schedule few such liberating offerings in the face of such attenuated interest – an attenuated interest which was, after all, based on a paucity of liberated thinking among camp females.

With respect to considerations of resettlement, meanwhile, and as these considerations were set against requirements for repatriation, the picture that emerged was considerably different from that painted by the Lao and Thai governments on the one hand, and by UNHCR and NGO staff on the other. These authorities all insisted that refugee women and children had no well-founded fear of persecution, and that those cases in which husbands, sons, brothers, or fathers did present a convincing case for a well-founded fear of persecution, this fear extended neither to female relatives nor to children.

The refugee women of the camps, however, held a different view. While it might be true, they agreed, that, in cases of repatriation, they were not running the risk of imprisonment or violent death – as did their men folk – they nevertheless implored the authorities to understand and to appreciate that they suffered the same degree of fear for their lives, for, without the presence of men in the family, women and their dependents were vulnerable to a host of ills ranging from poverty and starvation to abduction, sexual and other forms of abuse, and even death in all its many forms. These fears were very real and very well-founded, and yet they were not recognized by those who set refugee policy.

About the Author: Dr. Dia Cha is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies at Saint Cloud State University, Saint Cloud, Minnesota.

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