

**Coming Home?
The Integration of Hmong Refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand,
into American Society**

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Abstract

In December 2003, the U.S. State Department officially announced the acceptance of roughly 15,000 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand, into the United States of America. The Hmong refugees were scheduled to be resettled for family reunification in established Hmong communities. As social science research on migration indicates, the existence of ethnic communities is crucial for a successful adaptation to a host society for newcomers. Ethnic communities thereby serve as a buffer zone and provide initial assistance, which is especially important when governmental integration measures are not sufficient. In the case of the Hmong refugee resettlement, the U.S. economic and social incorporation efforts were inefficient, due to cutbacks in U.S. Federal funding and welfare reforms, causing a greater reliance on the receiving Hmong communities. This raises a number of questions about how much an ethnic community can absorb and is able to bear in order to fulfill the newcomers' needs. What are the limits and how does this affect the initial integration of the newcomers?

Introduction

In December 2003, the U.S. State Department publicly announced the resettlement of a Hmong refugee group from Wat Tham Krabok (WTK), Thailand, to the United States of America. The Buddhist temple grounds at Tham Krabok in the province of Saraburi, 90 miles northeast of Bangkok, were the temporary shelter for thousands of Hmong after the closure of the last refugee camps in Thailand in the mid-1990s. About 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War, approximately 15,000 Hmong were finally going to be reunited with their families in the U.S. Resettlement was scheduled to be completed within one year and happen under the auspices of the Family Reunification Program, which would settle the Hmong in established communities located mainly in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

The Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, were home to the largest metropolitan Hmong community in the U.S. and were consequently expecting a large share of the new refugees from WTK. With 40,000 to 60,000 current Hmong residents (2000 U.S. Census, Hmong National Development Inc.)¹, the Twin Cities acted as the cultural and socio-political center of Hmong life in the U.S. It was thus believed that resettlement and transition of the new refugees would be smooth and successful. However, as the refugees began to arrive in greater numbers, it was soon discovered that neither social service agencies nor the Hmong community in general were able to provide the level of support and assistance this refugee group needed.

This paper will start with a brief overview of the refugees' life in Thailand and their resettlement to the United States. It focuses on the transition into the Minneapolis/St. Paul Hmong-American community, thereby analyzing their social and economic integration into mainstream America. Since both groups, Hmong refugees in WTK and Hmong-Americans in

¹ Numbers vary due to source. Hmong community leaders and organizations believe that the official census numbers reflect an undercount due to cultural and language barriers, and a lack of information (Pfeifer and Lee 2004:3).

the U.S., were separated for several decades, both had adapted new social and cultural norms from their surrounding environment, leading to significant cultural changes. These differences promoted a discussion of the cultural integration of the new refugees within their own ethnic community in the state of Minnesota.

Methods

This study is based on Ph.D. related field research conducted both in Thailand in 2004 and during five months in 2005 with particular reference to the Hmong community in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN. The visit to Thailand served the purpose of providing the author with a deeper understanding of traditional Hmong culture and life. Besides the visit to Hmong villages, the researcher visited WTK and gathered first-hand information about conditions in the camp as well as circumstances and courses surrounding the resettlement process to the U.S. Personal observations and in-depth interviews with key officials, such as the commander of the military Task Force 546, the Program Coordinator of the International Office for Migration (IOM), and several local IOM staff members, deepened the author's knowledge and understanding about conditions and the environment the refugees of WTK were living under during the past decades.

The majority of the research, however, was conducted in Minneapolis/St. Paul, MN, from April to October, 2005. Fieldwork in the U.S. was made financially feasible by a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). This fieldwork provided the opportunity to gain insights into various aspects of life in the Twin Cities' vibrant Hmong community. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the new refugees' needs and concerns, the researcher conducted multiple open-ended, in-depth, face-to-face interviews and discussion groups with the refugees from WTK. Within these structured interviews the author gained knowledge in four specific areas: life and daily routine in WTK, first impressions upon arrival in the U.S., the transition into American culture, and experiences related to the local

Hmong-American community. Thanks to the assistance of Hmong-American family members, who served as interpreters during the interviews, information was accrued regarding the new refugee's immediate needs and concerns, but also regarding their hopes and wishes for the future. In addition to the new refugees' interviews, the researcher questioned several persons who were working either in state agencies, social service agencies, mutual assistance agencies, or were otherwise actively involved in the resettlement process. Further information was obtained in numerous community meetings, where new refugee issues were discussed.

A Confined World of 93 acres – Life at Wat Tham Krabok

When the Thai government started to close the last refugee camps in the mid 1990s, an estimated 40,000 Hmong refugees from Laos remained in Thailand.² Some Hmong sought refuge at WTK, which was a Buddhist monastery in Phraputtabat district, Saraburi province. WTK was established in 1957 by Luangphaw Chamroon Parnchard. It soon gained international recognition as a drug-rehabilitation center and Parnchard was even awarded by the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation in 1975 for his efforts to cure drug addicts.³

For years the Hmong at WTK enjoyed the protection and support of the abbot due to what Max Weber called his “charismatic authority” and due to his close relationship with the Thai royal family. He claimed that they were all Thai Hmong to avoid their repatriation to Laos. However, outside the Wat compound, the Hmong were considered illegal immigrants. They were not eligible for any international aid or assistance. They were ineligible for Thai citizenship or any kind of recognized legal status and thus deprived of certain rights. The Hmong were also vulnerable to different types of exploitation including denial to the criminal and civil justice systems, community services and earnings, and the assessment of fees for basic needs and services such as medical care and education.

² For a detailed account on life in refugee camps and more background information on the refugee situation in Thailand see: Long, L. (1993) *Ban Vinai – The Refugee Camp*. New York: Columbia University Press.

All Hmong refugees from WTK who were interviewed in the course of this research claimed that they were expected to work and to use their earnings to improve their lives, an anticipation that led to camp commerce. Men were usually hired by Thai employers for wages of about \$2.50 per day and they most commonly worked in the fields during the planting and harvesting season, for cement firms and at nearby construction sites. Other sources of income came from the production of handicrafts such as ceremonial knives, silver jewelry, or traditional instruments such as the *qeej*. Women usually were engaged in embroidery and sewing *Paj Ntaub* or traditional costumes for New Year's festivals and formal occasions; the costumes were then sold in the U.S. by relatives who, in turn, sent the money back. If the family was large enough and everyone was willing to physically work hard, there could be enough to make a decent living. However, many Hmong, especially the elderly, were relying on additional financial support from their relatives in third countries. As a military mission briefing from July 2004 states, 10% of the population was involved in small business, 10% in needlework and handicraft, 40% were unemployed but received some financial support from third countries, and another 40% were involved in labor work outside the camp (Tannarat, 2004).

Life at WTK, in general, equaled much more of a normal living experience and was unlike any previous experience the Hmong had gained in refugee camps. In WTK there were variations in living standards which would have never emerged in refugee camps where everyone was treated equally and services were provided. Basic resources needed for survival, such as access to water, food, shelter, sanitation, and wood, and basic services such as medical care or removal of garbage, were generally met for those who had adequate sources of income. A daily market, several stores, and small diners mostly run by local Thai residents inside the camp provided these necessities. Some families lived relatively well in houses with solid walls made of steel and cement and could afford consumer goods such as mobile

³ For more information see the homepage of the Magsaysay Foundation: www.rmaf.org.ph

phones, motorcycles, television sets, and VCRs. But at the same time there was a subsistence group at the camp which was exceedingly poor and depended heavily on their relatives from outside WTK for sheer survival.

The situation changed dramatically when the abbot of WTK, Luangphaw Chamroon Parnchard, passed away in May 1999. As of 1997 the Thai government was becoming more concerned with the high concentration of people living together at WTK, which at times turned into a medium-sized city of about 35,000 to 40,000 people. Additionally, there had been persistent and credible rumors that, first, WTK had served as a meeting ground for resistance fighters and insurgents in Laos, and second, the Hmong at WTK and some Thai officials were involved in drug smuggling. Although several Thai authorities and agencies were asked—particularly around election time—to seek a solution to these issues, things changed little and daily life for the Hmong continued. However, after the abbot passed away, the Wat was led by his brother Pha Charoen, who lacked the former abbot's charismatic authority and thus was not able to provide the same level of support to the Hmong community. Additionally, the internal political struggle of the Thai government to find a durable solution to the Hmong issue caused the Thai government to seize their chance to take control and to send in a military force. In April 2003, a joint task force was sent into WTK with the goal of restoring order. Task Force 546 under the command of Colonel Thanongsak Tannarat, had the strength of 176 men and 42 officials from the Thai government, including consultants, a database team, a public health service unit, and anti-riot policemen.

According to the Thai Colonel, the main mission of the Task Force was to prevent any suspected drug smuggling and related activities within the grounds of WTK (Personal communication with Colonel Tannarat, November 2004). Living adjacent to a place that served as a drug rehabilitation center had put a disreputable label on the Hmong community. The Hmong were widely considered to be drug addicts or dealers, and they were accused of

distributing drugs throughout the country. Hence, many Thai people believed the Hmong presented a severe danger to their society. Thai narcotics officials suspected WTK was being used as a transport point for drugs from the north and for Amphetamine pills from the Thai-Burmese border. In the military's search for drug activity, the Task Force sent a total of 77 drug addicts to the rehabilitation center and seized about 15,000 Amphetamine pills. Other than these cases there was no proof found of large scale drug dealing (Tannarat, 2004).

According to the interviewed Hmong refugees, life as it was known and their established degree of self-sufficiency underwent tremendous changes. The camp was fenced off with barbed-wire to separate the Hmong section from the monastery, and three checkpoints were installed with entrances/exits limited from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. for only 1,000 persons a day for safety reasons. The Thai employers needed to inform the military at least one day ahead about the type of job and financial compensation they were offering the Hmong; therefore, the majority of Hmong were not able to find work outside the camp any longer, causing many families to become even more impoverished and thus more dependent on relatives outside WTK.

As time passed, the security, education, health, and hygiene of the Hmong at WTK deteriorated and the Thai government needed a more durable solution. Sending military forces into WTK was only a short-term solution to the long-term issue of the Hmong's presence. The Thai government first approached the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) in June 2003 to find a third country for resettlement. The United States government agreed to accept the Hmong refugees from WTK under the Family Reunification Program, but did not make the announcement public until December 18, 2003 for humanitarian reasons (U.S. State Department). However, resettlement only applied to individuals who were registered by the Thai military and recognized as living at WTK as of August 2003. From April to August 2003, the Thai military compiled profile data for 1,740

families (15,282 people) (Tannarat, 2004). Considerable confusion reigned about the purpose of this military registration as there was little if any information or detail provided to the people involved. Rumors spread quickly among the Hmong that they were either being forced back to Laos or moved to a military camp; as a result, not all Hmong living in WTK registered with the Thai military.

From March until July 2004, the registered Hmong were interviewed for admission into the U.S. by the U.S. Embassy Refugee Unit and by the Department of Homeland Security. A total of 16,067 Hmong applied for resettlement consideration. Of this number, 15,658 were approved, while the cases of 64 were closed since they failed to appear for processing several times. Another 426 individuals were denied refugee status or were not eligible for resettlement since, for example, they held Thai citizenship, five of the Hmong refugee applicants tested positive for drugs (U.S. State Department).

A Generation of Refugees – the Hmong from Wat Tham Krabok

Receiving communities in the U.S. were soon challenged to incorporate the new Hmong refugees into society; however, communities, were not provided with much, if any, information by the U.S. government about this refugee population. Since the Hmong camp at WTK was not registered as an official refugee camp, no demographic information had been gathered or was available. During the summer months of 2004 there were task forces formed and delegations sent to WTK to gather information that would enable states and local communities to better serve the needs of this refugee group.

It was soon discovered that the Hmong refugees in WTK constituted an extremely young population. Nearly 57% of the residents were 17 years of age or younger. The majority of them (71%) were born in Thailand, mainly in the province of Saraburi (56%), where WTK was located, or in Loei province (31%), where the former refugee camp, Ban Vinai, was located. Only 29% were actually born in Laos (Personal Communication with U.S. Embassy

in Bangkok, Thailand). This led to the conclusion that the Hmong group consisted predominantly of teen-aged refugees who were confined to a refugee experience in Thailand, living with the consequences of having only limited opportunities for a better life in Thailand due to the decisions their parents once made. Given their overall youthfulness, most of the Hmong of WTK constituted a different political generation, one whose coming of age came long after the Hmong involvement in the Vietnam War and the subsequent oppression by the Pathet Lao.

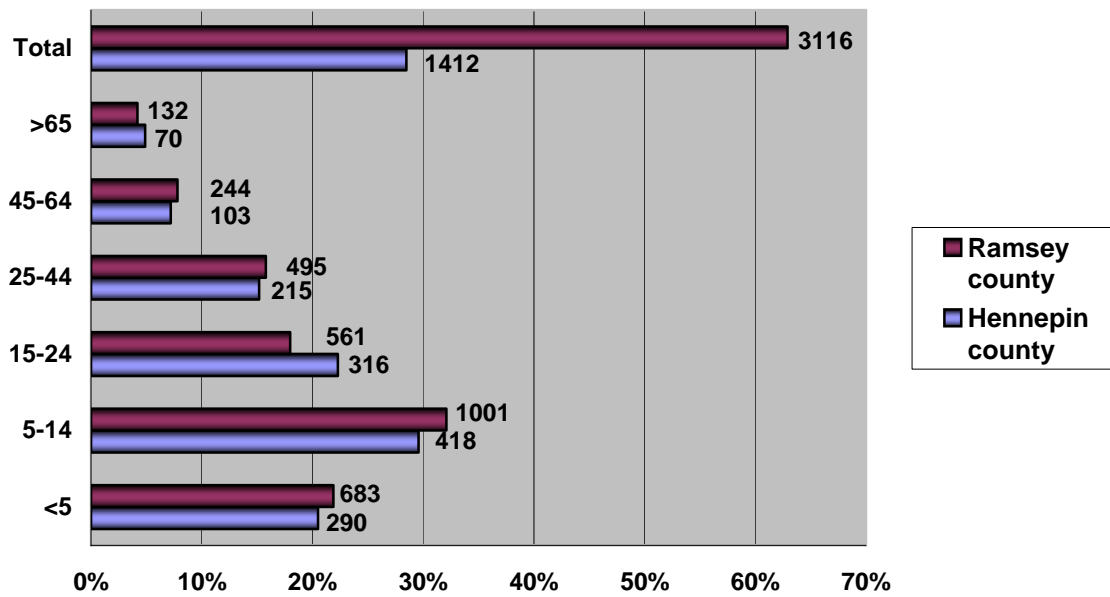
Resettlement to the U.S. was never thought to be an option for the Hmong of WTK, consequently they were preparing for life in Thailand. As a result, their level of literacy in the Thai and Hmong languages was found to be much higher than their level of literacy and speaking ability of the English language. Their English literacy actually proved to be significantly lower compared to some of the previous Hmong refugee groups. Approximately one-half of the children attended school at either the local Thai school, which limited their attendance to the 9th grade, or the Hmong school inside the camp. However, most Hmong children attended school for only two or three years due to a lack of money for school fees and supplies. Boys were usually favored to receive some education over girls. Educational opportunities for adults were extremely limited and many of the adults were neither literate in any language nor had any educational background (Hang 2004, Vang 2004, Xiong 2005). They usually pinned their hopes for a better life in the U.S. on their children rather than themselves. The typical family structure consisted of large, patriarchal families in which polygamy, early marriage, and authoritarian discipline were not uncommon. Due to early marriage women tended to give birth at a young age with little time between births (Vang 2004). Given these demographics, the core of this resettlement group was formed by a high number of school-aged teenagers who were not only in tune with Thai pop-culture but were also already married with several children and, thus, deeply embedded in family obligations.

Adjustment and Integration into the United States of America

Resettlement to the U.S.

Local communities and states prepared themselves for the expected influx of new refugees within a shorter than normal preparation time. Lengthy reports were prepared to detail the potential services needed by the refugees, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, job training programs, or interpreter services. There were also recommendations provided for service sectors, such as the public school system, public housing, and public health (including mental health), to provide a smooth transition to the new environment (American Paj Ntaub – Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report, Wisconsin’s Hmong Resettlement Task Force Report, A Special Report: A Coordinated Network of Support for Hmong Refugees to Sacramento County).

However, the early euphoric “roll-up-the-shirtsleeves” spirit dwindled after the first refugees started arriving in June 2004, quickly being replaced by frustration and helplessness as service providers became overwhelmed. From June to December 2004, a total of 9,201 Hmong refugees arrived nationwide. Minnesota received about 35% (3,257) of the refugees compared to Wisconsin with 21% (1,941), with peak months in September and November. In 2005 Minnesota’s share of refugees equaled 1,715, with a high number of arrivals coming in the summer months of June and July. In total, Minnesota resettled 4,972 refugees in 2004 and 2005. A local concentration occurred in the metropolitan area of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Hennepin County receiving 29% and Ramsey County receiving 63%, thereby adding further diversity and complexity to the largest metropolitan Hmong community in the United States.



Data Set: Minnesota Department of Health, Refugee Health Assessment Report, 2005

The majority of new arrivals in both counties were between the ages of 5-14 and only about 9% were older than 65 years of age (Minnesota Department of Health, 2005). Consequently, certain service sectors were challenged, but the overall impact was far greater than first imagined since the state of Minnesota had never before resettled such a large population in one place in such a short time frame.

Economic and Social Integration into U.S. Society

All new Hmong refugees entered the U.S. through the assistance of Refugee Resettlement Voluntary Agencies (VOLAGs)⁴, who resettled refugees with a sponsor under a contract grant from the U.S. Department of State. VOLAGs provided initial resettlement services for the first 90 days, but were not adequately informed of how many refugees to expect and at what pace though they needed to know this in order to assist the new arrivals with a well-trained staff. Catholic Charities, for example, resettled a total of 1,545 (31%) of the incoming Hmong refugees in Minnesota, 462 alone in September 2004. The State

⁴ Agencies in Minnesota include: Catholic Charities, International Institute of Minnesota, Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota, Minnesota Council of Churches, Refugees Services, and World Relief – Minnesota.

Department apparently underestimated the logistical problems they would encounter, which were further enhanced by a TB-outbreak in WTK in January 2005 that brought a one-month travel suspension to the projected flow of arrivals. The dilemma the resettlement agencies were facing was further enhanced by the fact that all of the agencies were already resettling equally high numbers of refugees, mainly Africans from Somalia and Liberia, and they were not in a position to halt any programs in favor of the Hmong group.

When previous groups of Hmong refugees arrived in the U.S. in the 1980s, many church groups acted as sponsors and many more community resources were available than that were almost completely unavailable to this group of new refugees. Church co-sponsoring often proved to be vital for achieving self-sufficiency. Congregations as an organized group were able to recruit people and generate resources to support one particular family, often for an extended period of time. The Hmong community, however, started to move away from church involvement over time and started to sponsor their relatives on their own. Anchor relatives were now supposed to fulfill much of that role, typically agreeing to provide core services like housing, food, clothing, transportation, and financial support, as well as teaching English, helping to fill out applications for social security benefits and public assistance, preparing for work, finding jobs, and enrolling eligible children in school (Blake, 1990).

Only in cases where the anchor is unwilling or clearly unable to provide the described level of support will VOLAGs find a third party in terms of volunteers from churches. Assistance thereby can vary from a specific need to the maximum level, when the refugee family has no support at all and the church group becomes involved in every aspect of that family's life. For example, the MN Council of Churches connected 12 churches which collectively helped with 19 refugee families in 2004. There were certainly more families in need, but about one-third of refugee families served by the MN Council of Churches refused

the volunteer's support.⁵ Cultural aspects such as pride or shame (not being able to sustain one's family), but also fear of religious proselytization, kept refugees from accepting additional help.

Ethnic sponsorship certainly has advantages since it can reduce stress and anxiety for the new refugees; however, the researcher's findings suggest there was a clear limit to what relatives could do to help the new arrivals. It soon turned out that the refugees' adjustment to the U.S. depended highly on their anchor's economic and social situation. For example, two significantly different resettlement experiences could be observed in Minnesota. Families who had resourceful anchor relatives who were acculturated to the U.S. and knew how to navigate the social system had a fairly good chance to adjust fast and well; however, the vast majority of anchor relatives were, despite their willingness, not in an economic position to assist their relatives with core services. As the 2000 U.S. Census shows, the median Hmong family income was \$32,384, which equaled only 64% the income of an average American family. Additionally, for the state of Minnesota, the 2000 Census specifically reveals that about 30% of the Hmong lived below the poverty line, 47% were unemployed, and about 42% had no schooling. The state of MN records also reveals the Hmong were less likely than other ethnic groups to hold jobs or to leave welfare after two to three years (Mattessich, 2000). Besides economic difficulties, some anchor relatives were either struggling with the responsibility or not knowledgeable about how to connect the new refugees with appropriate resources. Sponsoring relatives was seen as a moral obligation, but once the new refugees arrived in the U.S. they oftentimes had to rely on outside sources.

The newly arrived Hmong benefited from Hmong Mutual Assistance Agencies (MAAs) who offered community-based, long-term services.⁶ Refugees were taught to become self-sufficient and how to utilize resources around them in a variety of courses, such

⁵ Personal Communication with the Director of Refugee Services at MN Council of Churches, August 2005.

⁶ See www.hndlink.org for a complete list of Hmong MAAs serving the Minneapolis/St.Paul area.

as parenting, health care, school system, or understanding laws and regulations. However, with federal budget cuts in recent years, a majority of MAAs were already struggling to maintain basic community services and they were not adequately funded for services specifically targeting the new refugees. Funding concerns also led to a history of distrust between VOLAGs, some mainstream service providers and Hmong MAAs that caused less cooperation and a greater sense of competition. As a result, many services were duplicated. Refugees were rarely referred to other agencies to ensure their basic needs were met, and, in general, they were not informed about services that were even available to them. Due to limited outreach, the new refugees were depending on word of mouth to gain information about additional support. Larger MAAs were usually better linked to the community and served more refugees than smaller ones. Within a few months a severe gap between service providers and the community served emerged.

In terms of employment opportunities, the new refugees were highly influenced by their anchor relatives and sometimes received a false impression of what the welfare system would tolerate. Refugee assistance programs had evolved with the expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s and early 1970s, providing refugees with the right to access public assistance programs. In 1980, refugees received 36 months of financial benefits and medical assistance. The majority of the new refugees therefore wished to delay employment in order to gain English language and vocational skills first. Taking advantage of ESL-classes and training programs was a general attitude linked to the idea of entering the job market with a better education in order to receive a higher rate of pay.⁷ However, budget reforms over the past years resulted in heavy cuts to social programs, eventually leading to a new federal program called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Thus, in July 2004, Minnesota implemented a new state law, the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP),

⁷ Kolytk described similar findings in her research among the Hmong in Wausau, WI. Kolytk 1998: 84.

which required immediate job search activity for four months without full access to all social services and without direct access to the cash assistance portion. The impact of this new legislation caused great despair among many of the new refugees.

With little transferable work experience and few marketable skills, the new refugees were clearly in a disadvantaged position to become integrated into the American labor force and achieve economic self-sufficiency, a top priority of federal and state integration measurements as enunciated by the Refugee Act of 1980. A survey conducted in July 2005 by the Southeast Asian Community Council (SEACC) showed that 90% of 52 randomly selected new refugee families (293 individuals) stated educational and financial problems as their greatest stress factors. About 40% mentioned mental health issues resulting from financial difficulties, the language barrier, or a lack of transportation to support family needs (Data Collection, New Refugees in MN, SEACC).

Given the scarce financial resources, housing soon proved to be another major issue. Minneapolis/St.Paul had been experiencing a tight housing market for more than five years. Although rents were stable, they were not affordable for families on welfare. Additional public housing had not been built and waiting lists for existing residences or for vouchers which allowed families to pay only 30% of their income for rent were so extensive that, for example, no names had been added to the list in Minneapolis since 2003. Due to this huge demand, the Public Housing Department tightened enforcement of appraisal criteria such as the need for a rental history. Newly arriving refugees were not in a position to provide a rental history and were consequently unable to apply for public housing. Some Hmong refugees found their own solution by moving into the homeless shelter “Mary’s Place” in north Minneapolis that was run by the Catholic affiliated non-profit group Sharing & Caring Hands. Word spread quickly within the Hmong community, and the original six families from July 2004 evolved into a group of 54 families by March 2006, predominately consisting of

children (City Pages 27:1311). Although none of the refugees had actually been homeless, all of them either had lived with their anchor relatives or had already found an apartment for themselves; however, none of these refugees could afford to pay the high rent and utility bills. Besides financial reasons, cultural aspects again, such as shame and pride, prevented some Hmong from seeking other solutions and made them respond in a familiar manner: by seeking refuge. With Mary's shelter as their temporary home, the Hmong were able to provide for their families. Since no rent needed to be paid, the money could be saved or spent for other expenses, such as school supplies, which thereby deepened their dependency on the benevolence and support of others. However, the question remains whether this temporary strategy will lead this Hmong group to long-term self-sufficiency in the U.S.

Cultural Transition and Integration into the Hmong-American Community

Apart from these initial adjustments, which all refugees undergo to some extent upon arrival in the U.S., the Hmong from WTK were also challenged with cultural integration. Despite regular contact between the Hmong in WTK and their relatives in the U.S., the majority of all interviewed new refugees stated that they had no clear understanding of what their new life would be like. Since resettlement to America was never thought to be an option, there was a lack of focus on life in the U.S. Their relatives' stories did not relate to them individually, thus many of the new refugees lacked a clear image of the new world they would be resettled in. As Ann Swidler put it, "one needs an image of the kind of world in which one is trying to act" (Swidler,1986:275). If this image is missing the necessary skills and conduct cannot be adopted to move with ease within that new cultural community and culture shock will inevitably follow. For the Hmong at WTK, however, this new world, the U.S., became somewhat more personal upon the arrival of several Hmong-Americans either as part of the IOM staff or as part of delegations. Furthermore, all Hmong who were approved for resettlement took a 10-hour basic orientation class prior to departure. Within those five

days of cultural orientation, they received a general overview of life in the U.S. including topics such as housing, education, and law; however, their knowledge of the social environment in the U.S. was still limited. Before arriving in the U.S., the Hmong were ultimately expecting that their known way of life would dramatically change and adjustment to mainstream America would be challenging, but manageable with the support of the established Hmong community.

Sociological research for example by Portes and Rumbaut (1996²) has indicated that established ethnic communities often cushion the impact of cultural change with networks of kin and friends providing a social shelter and protecting the newcomers against initial economic difficulties. Hence it was largely expected among government departments and among the Hmong-American community alike that transition to the U.S. would be easier for these new refugees compared to former waves. First, the Hmong at WTK were already exposed to features of modern life such as electricity, cell phones or the Internet, which were considered prerequisites that would ease integration into mainstream America. Second, the new refugees benefited from an established Hmong network and infrastructure that would further accelerate the acculturation process. However, attention was often not fully given to the changes that had occurred over time within the Hmong-American community. Having been in the U.S. for almost 30 years, the Hmong selectively acculturated in many ways by blending aspects of American culture, which they thought valuable, with their own.⁸ The younger generation takes pride in their cultural heritage, although they have adopted social values and behavior patterns of mainstream America that stand in sharp contrast to traditional Hmong views. The Hmong-American community is often still perceived as one single large community based on their ethnic background by the general public, but it is a highly dynamic, changing group that contains several sub-groups. The community is distinguished by a growing political, social, and cultural complexity that is further enhanced by regional

disparity. Other sources of diversity within the Hmong-American community include the socio-political environment of each state, religious opposition (Christianity versus Hmong beliefs), differences between gender and generations, distinct levels of education (working class families versus Hmong professionals), and political activism. These social variables have all led not only to a greater diversity, but have made generalizations about a monolithic Hmong community in the U.S. impossible.⁹

Upon arrival in the U.S. the new refugees were challenged by the diversification of the Hmong community. My findings suggest that the new refugee groups' lives had been strongly influenced by outside factors. First, the closure of refugee camps by the Thai government caused them to seek refuge in a Buddhist monastery. In a confined place, people from different clans, backgrounds and places lived together, a predicament that stood in sharp contrast to once naturally developed villages as well as the values of independence and freedom. Second, the processing guidelines of the U.S. State Department determined who was eligible to enter the U.S. and who was not. The lengthy stay at WTK, the secluded location, and the vicinity of the camp led to the development of a strong identity in the sense of feeling and thought belonging to this particular group, which was further enhanced by their shared refugee experience. As research by social psychologists showed, group cohesion can also be strengthened by external threats (Levine, Moreland, 1998) as my findings support in the case of the Hmong at WTK. Due to their illegal status, there were constant threats from outside forces, such as the police or military and constant reminders of their inferior status, such as exploitation by local Thai, all of which strengthened cohesion within the group. Since no full membership in Thai society could be obtained, the practice of Hmong traditions and customs

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the types of acculturation see Portes and Rumbaut (1996²).

⁹ Several studies have been conducted regarding aspects of diversification among the Hmong-American community. See for example Keown-Bomar (2004) *Kinship Networks among Hmong-American refugees*, Faruque (2002) *Migration of Hmong to the Midwestern United States*, or Miyares (1997) *Changing Perceptions of Space and Place as Measures of Hmong Acculturation*.

and upholding of Hmong values was a logical response to outside neglect that led to a greater homogeneity in the group over years. About 94% of the Hmong in WTK practiced traditional Hmong beliefs and only 5% were Christians (U.S. Embassy Bangkok, Thailand). The established Hmong culture provided a firm sense of belonging and minority identity, especially among the youth, and bestowed a sense of security about who they were.

Arriving in the U.S. and experiencing a Hmong community that had changed significantly in terms of traditions, values, and mentality over the years added to the initial adjustment stress and caused mental health concerns. For example, many Hmong refugee males admitted in interviews to suffering from a loss of status, a loss of control over their lives, and feelings of inferiority once more as they were labeled too traditional and too conservative by their own people. Some Hmong expressed concerns that they felt pressured to adjust even faster in order to gain acceptance and respect. Stereotypes and prejudices existed on both sides. The new refugees were often perceived by Hmong-Americans as backward, needy, and dependent on others by playing the victim's role in terms of being very vocal in expressing their needs and being critical when offered support. Hmong-Americans, in turn, were stereotyped as being too "white" and too "Americanized," neglecting core values of Hmong culture such as respect for elders, obedience, and a distinct sense of family and clan affiliation, thus following the hierarchical role and structure. Notions of what constituted Hmong behavior and culture differed greatly among these two groups.

Conclusion

Resettlement of the Hmong refugees from WTK proved to be a challenge for all participants. Since the Hmong arrived in the U.S. under the Family Reunification Program, the impact was especially noticeable in states already hosting large Hmong communities such as Minnesota.

Lack of federal funding, scarce information regarding this refugee population, and the short time frame all complicated assistance to the new refugees in receiving communities. A general lack of communication and cooperation between federal and state agencies as well as social service providers further enhanced adjustment stress. Federal social service program reforms in recent years caused financial hardship. In addition, educational limitations, a lack of transferable occupational skills, the language barrier, and cultural differences put the Hmong of WTK made it difficult to achieve a swift economic and social integration into the U.S.

With limitations in assistance, there was a greater reliance on the support network within the Hmong community. Although the established Hmong community certainly eased the transition for the newly arrived refugees to a certain extent, the Hmong are predominately a low-income, working-class population that did not have much access to financial resources, despite their willingness and heartfelt efforts. Thus, the Hmong community clearly possessed limits in its ability to sustain a sizable group of new refugees.

The new refugees expected cultural adjustment to mainstream America to be difficult. However, upholding a strong Hmong identity and then being confronted with a rather diverse and heavily segmented community of Hmong-Americans proved to be even more challenging. Many new refugees felt intimidated and overwhelmed by this diversity. They felt uncertain as to how to act and function in the outside world and within their own cultural community. To what extent and at what pace they will regain that security remains to be seen. Over time adjustment will certainly become easier and it can be hoped that certain issues, such as housing expenses, will not aggravate among the new refugees to the point that mental health issues, such as depression and suicidal threats, become overwhelming. As the history of the Hmong has shown, migration and adaptation to a new environment are not new challenges. However, only the future will tell whether the new refugees will be fully included

and absorbed by the established Hmong-American community or whether they will become a somewhat isolated new fragment of the community that bears the culture of the homeland and thus further increases the complexity and segmentation of the Hmong-American community.

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