

## **The Evolution of Hmong Self-Help Organizations in Minnesota**

by

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### **Abstract**

The Hmong have several types of self-help organizations, classified accordingly to their purposes, to assist the Hmong to adapt to life in American culture. The central research question of this modest exploratory study relates to how these organizations have evolved over the years in terms of their programming focus and funding strategies. To answer this question, a qualitative approach is used to guide the collection and analysis of data. The study was conducted in the St. Paul/Minneapolis region from 2007 to 2012, where a large population of Hmong refugees has settled since the mid-1970s and where these organizations were founded.

**Keywords:** Hmong Americans, self-help organizations, cultural adaptation

### **Introduction**

The Hmong, one of the three largest ethnic groups in Laos, began seeking political asylum in the U.S. in the mid-1970s when Laos fell into Communism. According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the 2010 Hmong population of permanent residents and citizens was estimated to be 260,073 (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, 2011, p. 15). Though there are Hmong living throughout the U.S., the Census Bureau reports that the largest Hmong population of 91,224 resides in California; the second largest population of 66,181 lives in Minnesota; and the third largest community of 49,240 may be found in Wisconsin. A sizable number of these people were political

refugees and therefore confronted social, cultural, and language barriers, so adapting to life in American society was challenging. This study seeks to explain how the Hmong have attempted to overcome these obstacles through the use of organizations.

During the Vietnam War (1964-1973), there was a secret war in Laos, in spite of the fact that Laos was designated as a neutral country by the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. According to the Accords, neither the U.S. nor North Vietnam could use Laos to advance their military missions. However, because of its strategic location, Laos served as a buffer state during the war, and neither the U.S. nor North Vietnam left Laos alone. To avoid international criticism, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) secretly conducted a covert operation in Laos. The CIA provided economic and military assistance to the Royal Lao Government (RLG) to prevent Communist expansion in the country (Barney, 1967; Colby, 1978; Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

During the secret war in Laos, the Hmong who fought on the side of the RLG and in alliance to the U.S. against the communists earned a reputation of being good fighters. The Hmong special guerrilla units (SGUs) fought well and were considered “The most important group among these armed tribesmen, both in terms of quality and in numbers” (Blaufarb, 1972, p. 10). Colonel Arthur ‘Bull’ Simons, commander of the U.S. Special Forces in Laos, said that by 1961 the Hmong “had proved themselves the only soldiers in Laos capable of defeating communists in the field” (cited in Quincy, 2000, p. 134). If the Hmong were good fighters, adjusting well to new combat environments, could they transfer their combat skills to cope with new issues in America’s high-tech society?

Since the late 1970s, scholars have observed that the Hmong have struggled to deal with new social, cultural, language, and unemployment challenges in the U.S. These challenges have required different leadership skills, strategies, and approaches. Arriving in the U.S. from refugee camps in Thailand, the Hmong, mostly former soldiers and swidden farmers, found themselves in a sea of cultural shocks and barriers that created difficulties for them as they attempted to adapt to life in mainstream American culture. To address such issues, Hmong leaders, with the assistance of their American friends, established several types of organizations to provide social, cultural, linguistic, and employment services to help their Hmong compatriots in adjusting to life in the U.S.

### **Literature Review**

There is a fairly extensive literature pertaining to ethnic organizations, a selection of studies from the broader relevant literature will be highlighted here. Key themes of the broader literature relate to the functions immigrant and refugee organizations provide to their clients and the relative effectiveness of these organizations in facilitating the adaptation of refugees and immigrants with broader implications for research into the relative merits of assimilatory as opposed to ethnic solidarity adaptation strategies for refugees and immigrants in American society. Werbner (1985) studied the voluntary associations of Pakistanis and other ethnic groups in Britain. This researcher found that those associations with “ambiguous” missions with multiple interests in social, cultural, and political issues were more likely to sustain themselves. In contrast, ethnic organizations with narrow missions and constituencies

were less likely to survive. Schoeneberg (1985) studied the ethnic organizations of Greek, Italian, and Turkish immigrants in West Germany in the early 1980s. The researcher observed that these immigrant organizations formed the building blocks of their integration to life within the host society. Although the missions of these organizations were to assist clients in adjusting to West Germany, the organizations' more practically focused on their clients' cultural, religious, and language preservation. The researcher writes that these groups for the most part encouraged intragroup social and cultural interactions as opposed to intergroup socialization with members of the host society. In addition, homeland politics continued to be a strong focus of the leadership of these organizations.

Hein (1997) studied Indochinese refugee associations and argued that ethnic competition for resources in the forms of grants, in-kind assistance, and other forms of support explained the formation of these associations in the 1980s and early 1990s. He posits that only those ethnic associations that could adjust well to carry out the interests of their clients and funders (including federal and state agencies) were likely to survive over the long term.

Majka and Mullan (2002) compared and contrasted Southeast Asian refugee and Eastern European immigrant and refugee organizations in terms of their relative effectiveness in helping their clients adapt to life in Chicago in the late 1980s. They found that instead of assisting with adaptation to mainstream America, the majority of Southeast Asian organizations had actually hampered the process of adjustment. Given their past experiences with traditional bureaucratic hierarchies, many board members of

these organizations operated their programs from the top-down. In addition, hidden agendas associated with homeland political activities at times intermingled with the missions of certain social service agencies. While the Southeast Asian refugee organizations did help ethnic group members to some degree in their transition to the local community and wider society, the generally more established East European immigrant and refugee organizations were more efficient and effective in assisting their clients in adjusting to life in Chicago according to the researchers' measures. Higher levels of education and cultural similarities to those they served helped the staff of Eastern European groups better meet the needs of their clients.

More specifically, Hmong cultural émigré organizations have been studied by some previous scholars. Writers have examined these topics: organizational activities and functional responsibilities, leadership tensions between the older Hmong generation and the younger Hmong generation in organizational settings, inter-organizational conflicts, and Hmong clan systems and ethnic enclaves.

In her early study of Southeast Asian refugee organizational activities and responsibilities, including those of the Hmong, Bui (1983) examined the types of program services that were adopted to assist refugee newcomers in adjusting to life in America. Scott (1986) compared the Hmong 'pre-migration' model of social organizations with the Hmong 'American nonprofit' organizational model and observed a pattern of intra-organizational conflicts between older and younger Hmong leaders at the Lao Family Community, Inc. (LFC), a Hmong self-help organization, in Santa Ana, California (p. 71). The former group of individuals, who gained leadership experience

from the pre-migration model of social hierarchy, preferred a top-down model of organization, in which decisions were made under the central command of the late General Vang Pao, a principal founder of the organization and the supreme president of all LFC affiliates. However, the younger Hmong leaders, who were more Americanized, rejected the pre-migration model and advocated for a decentralized network of American nonprofit organizations, in which local boards of directors independently made decisions based on constituent interests. These differences, Scott concluded, formed the basis of intra-organizational conflicts within the broader organizational environment (p. 5).

Olney (1993) described the development of two Hmong associations in Des Moines, Iowa, in the 1980s. This author utilized Weber's concepts of communal and associational organization to contrast two models of organization utilized by these local Hmong organizations. The models involved organizing associations in ways that the first generation of Hmong understood while also using more typical features of the American nonprofit organization to appeal to non-Hmong supporters and funders. Olney defines a "dual organization" as an agency in which there are both pre-migration patterns of organization and patterns of organization more familiar to the host society.

In her study of Hmong communities in California, Miyares (1997) argues that Hmong clan systems serve as bridges bringing clan members together to form ethnic enclaves. Culturally, she notes, the Hmong are divided into agnatic kinship groups of patrilineal clans, sub-clans, and lineage groups. Of these three cultural institutions, lineage has been the most important to the development of Hmong enclaves in the

Central Valley of California. Within a lineage, there is a chief. When an important Hmong lineage leader settled in Fresno, for example, his immediate relatives followed him to the city, where there are many Hmong clans, sub-clans, and lineages. These constituted the bases of Hmong enclaves where members have socialized among themselves with limited social and cultural adaptation to mainstream American culture.

In his Hmong American political history, Hillmer (2010) describes the motivating factors and circumstances that led to the founding of several Hmong organizations: the Lao Family Communities in different locations across the U.S.; the United Lao National Liberation Front (also known as Neo Hom in the Lao language), the homeland political arm of the late General Vang Pao; the Hmong National Development; the Hmong American Partnership; the Center for Hmong Arts and Talent; the Minnesota Hmong Youth Association; and the Hmong Cultural Center of Minnesota. Hillmer pays particular attention to conflicts between the more established Lao Family groups, Neo Hom, Hmong National Development, and Hmong American Partnership in these organizations' early years in the 1990s.

Vang (2010) discusses in some depth the early development of Hmong community organizations in Minnesota including Lao Family Community of Minnesota, the Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, Inc., and the Hmong Christian Missionary Alliance church. Vang describes the emergence of a leadership elite of both former Hmong military leaders in Laos as well as more educated Hmong organizational "entrepreneurs" who began representing themselves to social service agencies and funders as cultural brokers to the resettled Hmong refugee

masses in the late 1970s and early 1980s. She also notes that by the early to mid-1980s, an increasing variety of Hmong organizations were forming to serve the Minnesota community, each claiming to represent a constituency within the community. She writes (p. 92):

“Political squabbles may be the best description of the evolution of Hmong ethnic organizations, as tensions based on clan affiliation, gender, and perspectives on homeland politics have divided community members. For example, if individuals were dissatisfied with certain aspects of an organization, they would frequently move on to start another agency. Consequently, the idea that community-based organizations represent ‘the Hmong community’ is blurred with clan, gender, political perspective, and generation politics. Although the existence of these organizations does not depend on preexisting organizations in Hmong society, their practices reflect preexisting categories in Hmong culture.”

### **Methods and Study Scope**

Since the topic of Hmong refugee self-help organizational evolution has not been systematically studied and there is not enough information for theory building and hypothesis formulation, it was determined that the appropriate methodology for this study would be a qualitative approach. A rationale for utilizing this approach is that this is an exploratory study with unknown variables and theories. John Creswell (1995, p. 21) notes:



One of the chief reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory; not much has been written about the topic or population being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to informants and to build a picture based on their ideas.

Still, another reason for choosing this approach is that data collected from the study sites involve rich descriptions of conversations with interviewees, and the information cannot be analyzed by effectively using statistical procedures. As such, a qualitative approach was judged most suitable for data collection and analysis of the study.

### **Interviewees**

This paper proposes to analyze how Hmong self-help organizations have evolved to address issues Hmong Americans have confronted as they have attempted to adapt to life in mainstream America. With this goal in mind, the study examines a sample of four Hmong self-help organizations: the Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc. (LFCM); the Hmong American Partnership, Inc. (HAP); the Yang Wameng (prosperity) Association, Inc. (YWA); and The Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, Inc. (AAHWM). Despite the study's small sample size, each chosen organization represents a specific type of organization that has provided basic social and cultural services to Hmong in the U.S. LFCM and HAP represent a traditional model of mutual assistance organizations providing social services to immigrant and/or refugee communities. The program services provided by YWA can be generalized to explain the program services of other clan groups, and the

program services of the AAHWM may also be generalized to some degree to the program services of other local Hmong women's groups.

This research follows Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba's (1985, p. 202) principle of "saturation" or "redundancy," in which the researchers keep adding informants until they find that new interviewees add little or no information to what has already been learned from earlier interviewees. The researchers stopped interviewing representatives from each organization under study when the researchers no longer learned extensive new information from additional interviewees. In total, the researcher interviewed 25 people, who may be classified as follows: four were organizational founders, seven were board members, nine were staff members, and five were members. The number of people interviewed from each organization varied from five to nine interviewees, depending on the principle of saturation. While many of these interviewees asked to be identified by only their last names and the initial letters of their first names, others agreed to disclose their first and last names, and still others requested to be unidentified.

### **Data Collection**

Data collected for this study came from organizational documents, organizational audiovisuals, speeches and websites. The sources were triangulated in several ways: the researcher studied English language organizational documents, including by-laws, financial balance sheets, annual reports, and newsletters. The researcher also studied both Hmong language and Lao language documents; and watched and listened to organizational audiovisuals, such as videocassette tapes recorded by the organizations. Most importantly, the major source for this study were

interviews conducted in the Minneapolis/St. Paul region of Minnesota, the center of the Hmong refugee intelligentsia, in which most social and political activities occur. The interviews were conducted between 2007 and 2011, and the participants were interviewed individually a single time. Each interview ranged from one to two hours, with most interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Once data are collected, they are analyzed and organized in ways that develop themes, refine concepts, and link these ideas to create theories for understanding the phenomena under investigation. In other words, data analysis is defined as “the process of making sense out of the data” (Merriam 1998, p. 178). To make sense out of the data, the construction of coding categories were used to generate overarching themes for understanding the evolving structure and functions of Hmong organizations in the Twin Cities region.

### **Study Scope**

Importantly, the researcher would like to briefly note that the information presented here is intended as a modest exploratory study. It is hoped that the data and findings presented here will be useful to other researchers engaging in future studies of the functions, structural characteristics and evolution of Hmong organizations as well as immigrant and refugee organizations more generally.

## **Findings**

### **Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc.**

The Lao Family Community of Minnesota, Inc. (LFCM), a Hmong nonprofit organization, is an affiliate of the Lao Family Community (LFC), Inc. founded in March 1977 by the late General Vang Pao and his associates. The LFC has functioned as a federation with several other affiliates in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Fresno, California; and in other U.S. cities where there are sizeable Hmong populations. Adopting this form of nonprofit federation allowed Vang Pao to control all LFC affiliates as the supreme president; he thereby could retain his leadership in the Hmong American community through this institutional arrangement. In 1983, according to Y. Lor, an employment manager at LFCM, Vang Pao demanded that the Hmong Association of Minnesota (HAM), founded under the leadership of army Major Boua Fue Yang, change its name to LFCM. An unpublished LFC document (1981) also mandates that

[i]n a section of the community (or any city) where there [are] at least five refugee families and up [sic], the refugees [choose] one person to represent them and [send] that person's name to the Lao Family Community [the national headquarters in Santa Ana] for approval and appointment. (p. 8)

### **Social, Cultural, Language, and Unemployment Issues**

Having secured his leadership of the Hmong in America, Vang Pao turned to identify the issues confronting the Hmong in American society. Among the issues identified was the language barrier. C. S. Her, an interviewee, described the language barrier as well as the basic survival issues he confronted in America:

In 1979, when we arrived in Minnesota, our American sponsor rented us a two-bedroom apartment in St. Paul. He brought us food twice a week, but we did not like the food, for it was bread, peanuts, and canned food. But we could not tell him what we wanted to eat. We wanted to cook our own food, but we were afraid of using the stove and oven because we were not sure how to use them although our sponsor showed us. Soon he found me a janitorial job, but I did not know how to communicate with the employer and did not know how to operate the cleaning machines. I was sent home. My sponsor was angry and stopped visiting us for three days. He then brought a Hmong who spoke English to visit us and to ask me why I did not go to work. I explained to my sponsor through the Hmong interpreter that I was sent home. After that, my sponsor seemed happy and visited again. When I met the Hmong, I was happy and asked for General Vang Pao, the Hmong leader, and proposed organizing in order to get help from other Hmong who spoke English. (August 7, 2010)

In the 1980s, to address these issues and promote Hmong self-sufficiency in America, the LFCM, similar to its other affiliates under the direction of Vang Pao, adopted several programs: a social services program, a mental health program, an English-as-a-second language (ESL) program, and a basic vocational training program. The social service program focused on basic survival skills, such as housekeeping, understanding tenant rights and responsibilities, grocery shopping, public transportation, and other public services that included police departments, fire departments, and parks and recreation. This program also conducted workshops on cultural awareness, sanitation,

and safety at home, on the streets, and in the workplace. In the late 1990s, the LFCM terminated this program because it was felt that the local Hmong population had acquired basic survival skills.

In Laos, the Hmong principally relied on herbal medicines and shamanism. The Hmong were not aware of the American health-care system; thus, health-care issues have been problematic for them, as they have attempted to adjust to life in mainstream American culture. In response to this issue, the LFCM designed a mental health program to provide information to Hmong patients and to refer them to both public and private health care providers. Bilingual staff members were hired to assist these patients in scheduling appointments and in understanding their own health-care needs. The LFCM has also assisted these patients to address their family health problems through family counseling. According to the *Lao Family Annual Report* (2007), this program was later expanded to include other elements, including chemical awareness initiatives. Working collaboratively with the Ramsey County Assessors Group, LFCM has provided drug use prevention education. In partnership with the Ramsey County Family Support Project, the Rule 29 Mental Health Clinic, and other public health groups, LFCM has also tried to improve the emotional and mental functioning of Hmong refugee children and their families. The organization has provided services including assessment, support services, information referral, and consultation.

Recognizing English as a prerequisite for social and cultural adaptation to mainstream America, in the 1980s, the LFCM developed an ESL program. Today, according to an interviewee who asked to withhold his identity, this literacy program

remains principally intact, but it has been changed somewhat. Citizenship classes, for example, were added to educate the older Hmong generation about American culture, politics, and geography in preparation for their citizenship tests.

Adhering to the Hmong value of self-reliance, in the 1980s, the vocational program included courses in cashiering, electronics assembly, and upholstering and making furniture. The program also provided employment services in which LFCM staff members worked with both public and private employers to search for jobs for graduates. According to the *Lao Family Annual Report* (2007), the services of this program have changed considerably. Working in partnership with the Minnesota Family Investment Program, LFCM, for example, has in recent years offered services for job searches, resume building, interviewing skills, and job development. By providing limited tuition to those who need more job training, the LFCM also assists recently laid off workers.

An analysis of LFCM's service programs shows that this nonprofit entity has been a contributor to Hmong refugee adaptation. An anonymous interviewee who conducted an assessment measuring LFCM's program effectiveness reported that the social service programs have been somewhat effective, assisting the Hmong refugees in adapting to life in Minnesota. For example, many first generation Hmong who received the education provided by the LFCM's citizenship learning program passed citizenship tests and became American citizens. A visit to LCFM's website in September 2012 indicates the following programming areas: English Education, Social Work Intake and Youth and Family Services.

Some anonymous informants noted that LCFM has also had its well-publicized drawbacks over the years, at times carrying out an unstated agenda of the Neo Hom, aimed at toppling the current Communist government of Lao People's Democratic Republic. In this sense, it could be argued that the LCFM in earlier years to some extent slowed the process of Hmong adaptation in the U.S. The organization's actions in the 1980s and 1990s involved supporting Neo Hom's homeland policy, with the ultimate goal of toppling the current Communist government of the LPDR and with the hope of bringing the Hmong back to Laos, rather than residing in America permanently. Following the death of General Vang Pao on January 6, 2011, competing factions began waging an ongoing battle for control of the LCFM Board of Directors in the local court system (Ly, 2011). In 2012, one of these factions set up a new organization named Lao Family Social Services across the street from the LCFM offices in Saint Paul. LCFM and the new, similarly named agency sponsored competing summer festivals in the Twin Cities area in July 2012 (Brewer, 2012).

According to information accessible on the Minnesota Attorney General's website, LCFM had total revenues ranging from \$1.8 million - \$2.5 million between 2007-2010. The organization's total revenues were \$2,200,689 in the fiscal year ending December 31, 2010, which was the most recent financial report that was available at the time of this writing. In 2010, LCFM received \$785,884 in Direct Public Support (which includes contributions from the public and foundation grants), \$1,366,271 in Government Grants and \$48,534 in Other Revenue.



### **Hmong American Partnership, Inc.**

The evolution of Hmong American Partnership or HAP has involved a succession of organizations, and the school of thought that holds that organizations often emerge as products of countervailing interests within communities is helpful for understanding the impetus for the formation of HAP. The founder of HAP, T. Christopher Thao, the first licensed Hmong attorney in America, and his friend Robert Anderson, a member of the American Refugee Committee in Minneapolis, were interested in achieving the mission of “Hmong Americanization.” This mission could be achieved with these strategies: “to foster trust; to assist Hmong in achieving their full potential and [in] participating actively in the community; and to promote mutual respect, cultural awareness, and the exchange of knowledge and values.” (*HAP Annual Report* 2008, p. 3)

HAP, according to William Yang (January 15, 2007), the former Executive Director, adopted two major programs purposely aimed to help the younger Hmong generation adapt to life in Minnesota. HAP’s early initiatives included a self-sufficiency program and the youth and family service program. The self-sufficiency program includes both English classes and job training and placement. Building strong inter-organizational networks with other local social service and literacy organizations, HAP has recruited and trained Hmong American parents in its English classes. Courses include social and cultural awareness, parenting styles, parenting goals, child development and discipline, and creating positive role models through employment, community services, and strong family foundations. Additionally, HAP has over the

years worked with more than 150 Minnesota businesses and agencies for the purposes of job referral and placement. For several years, HAP has been a contracted service provider with Ramsey County, Minnesota for the *Minnesota Family Investment Program*, or *MFIP* which is Minnesota's welfare reform program for low-income families with children. In recent years, HAP has added Karen and Bhutanese caseworkers and employment counselors to its staff in order to serve more recently arriving groups of refugees in its economic self-sufficiency programs.

To help Hmong youth integrate into American culture, the youth and family services program several years ago established inter-organizational networks with other local groups. According to an anonymous interviewee, HAP has worked collaboratively with both Minneapolis and St. Paul public schools to offer after-school classes for fourth to eighth graders. HAP also developed several programs to assist Hmong youth. A Hmong American youth pride program was designed to help Hmong teens improve their grades and self-esteem, and to stay away from drugs, alcohol, and violence. A *peem tsheej* (struggle for success) program has helped youth ages 12-18 realize their self-confidence through artistic and life-building skills. Working collaboratively with both youth and parents, the program over the years has also offered courses on Hmong culture, American culture, and youth-parent relations. Finally, HAP also established *Hmong Teen Magazine* to invite Hmong youth to express their views in writing. This magazine was published for more than a decade. A visit to HAP's website in September 2012 indicates the following programming areas: Education and Training, Elderly

Services, Housing and Economic Development, Employment Services and Youth and Family Services.

HAP, drawing on the strengths of both Hmong leaders and American leaders, has rotated the board officers and directors among both Hmong and non-Hmong professionals—doctors, lawyers, bankers, and community leaders who possess both leadership skills and resources. HAP has also at times been associated with conflict in the Hmong community. In 2007, intensive internal conflict surrounded the organization's board of directors' removal of William Yang, the longtime executive director of the large social services agency. Community protests over the change of leadership received extensive attention in local media (Asian American Press, 2007). Bao Vang succeeded William Yang as HAP's leader. Anonymous interviewees described a high level of employee turnover at various levels of the organization as well as frequent shifts in programming strategy at the organization in recent years.

According to information accessible on the Minnesota Attorney General's website, HAP had total revenues ranging from \$4.0 million and \$5.8 million between 2008-2011. The organization's total revenues were \$5,801,720 in the fiscal year ending December 31, 2011, which was the most recent financial report that was available at the time of this writing. In 2011, HAP received \$326,931 in Direct Public Support (which includes contributions from the public and foundation grants), \$3,440,103 in Government Grants and \$2,034,686 in Other Revenues. It is notable that HAP's share of Other Revenues has increased from around \$300,000 in 2008 to more than \$2 million in 2011. In recent years, according to informants, the organization has increasingly

developed “social enterprises”, including a transportation company as additional sources of income. In contrast to the other nonprofit agencies included in this study, an analysis of financial reporting data shows that most of HAP’s revenue growth in recent years has been due to substantial increases in income in the Other Revenues category. HAP is currently the largest Hmong social services organization in the U.S. in terms of budget size.

### **Yang Wameng Association, Inc.**

In contrast to LFCM and HAP, the Yang Wameng Association, Inc. (YWA), a clan self-help national organization, was established to assist clan members in adapting to life in America. This story illustrates the importance of clan politics in the formation of the YWA, according to an interviewee who asked to withhold his identity. In 1985, Yang Dao, the first Hmong to earn a doctorate and a Neo Hom member, quit his membership with Neo Hom. Yang Dao has supported the U.S. foreign policy toward Laos: arguing a diplomatic approach would likely be more effective than military action when attempting to influence change among the Lao Communists. Vang Pao and his Neo Hom associates, on the other hand, adopted an approach of advocating the overthrow of the Lao Communist government. These policy differences drove the two leaders apart in the mid-1980s.

In 2001, Yang Dao filed a lawsuit against several Neo Hom members claiming defamation. To pay his attorneys, Yang Dao established a committee, consisting of some former board members of the YWA, to solicit contributions from the Yongs and

from his supporters. Thus, the YWA was established in part for the purpose of political self-defense against Neo Hom's attempts at homeland political intimidation and control.

Similar to the employment service programs of LFCM and HAP, the YWA, to assist its clan members in adjusting to life in America, also adopted an economic self-sufficiency program. In the 1980s, the majority of the Yangs, like other clan members, had just arrived in the U.S. and thus relied upon public assistance; this welfare dependency imposed a serious economic threat to clan members. Yang Dao, a cofounder of the YWA, explained:

An important goal leading to the formation of the Yang Association is economic self-sufficiency. We need to remind our Yangs about the threat of public assistance. We want to remind our Yangs about the Hmong value of self-reliance, and we believe that the way to help our people to leave the vicious cycle of poverty is to get organized, and the Yang Association was founded to provide education about employment, higher education, and leadership responsibility to our Yangs through workshops and conferences that aim to promote acculturation. (June 5, 2007)

Finally, in the process of social and cultural adaptation, immigrants typically retain elements of their own cultures and adapt to the culture of the host society simultaneously. Consistent to this norm of social and cultural adaptation, YWA has also adopted a program of cultural preservation. It was the goal of the YWA to preserve the Yang's cultural practices in order to retain their clan affinities within the pluralistic society of the U.S., Yang See explained:

A Yang cultural taboo forbidding all men to eat animal hearts is a symbol of our brotherhood that implies social and cultural reciprocity and political self-defense. We want to keep our clan affinity because it is our sense of belonging. As such, we have formed the Yang Association to educate our clan members about the importance of the clan identity and to appreciate the cultural diversity of American pluralistic society. (June 6, 2007)

The researcher could not find a publicly accessible website for YWA. Recent financial information for YWA is not available on the Minnesota Attorney General's website.

#### **The Association for the Advancement of Hmong Women in Minnesota, Inc.**

The Hmong patriarchal social system of governance gives women little voice in politics and, to a certain extent, in culture; they, however, compared to women in Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, have commanded a high degree of social and cultural status. In the Hmong belief system of Animism, Hmong women, unlike women in these Theravada Buddhist countries who could not become Buddhist nuns, could become shamans (a term referring to both men and women who are spiritual healers), performing various rituals, including soul callings and going into trances with the spiritual world and communicating with ancestors. Hmong women also command a high degree of respect in providing primary care for the well-being of their children and monitoring their families' wealth. As such, Hmong women have important functions to play in the sustenance of the social and cultural pillars of Hmong society.

Despite these responsibilities, Hmong women, from their perspective, have been perceived unevenly. In Laos, for example, Hmong women were, to a certain

extent, confined to the realm of household affairs, primarily responsible for the well-being of their families. Hmong men made most major decisions in non-household sectors including farming and community politics. The unequal distribution of responsibilities and decision making between men and women formed the basis for the formation of the AAHWM and its program services. Lee Vang, executive director of the association, explained:

In the 1980s, most Hmong men still did not change their attitude of domination: they believed that they should lead the community, although they had no leadership experience in America. This attitude socially, economically, and politically threatened not only Hmong women but also the entire Hmong community. In the process of adjusting to mainstream America, we women organized the Association to counteract such threats and to empower Hmong women and girls, so we, like other women in America, would be treated equally, consistent to the spirit of American egalitarianism. (June 18, 2007)

With opportunity and responsibility, Hmong women organized themselves to advance their leadership potential. K. Vang, the board-vice president, explained:

Here in America, both men and women should share equal responsibilities in their family affairs, for men and women are wage earners to support their families. In addition, given the high level of education women have achieved, women should also lead men in organizations, in the workplace, and in other communities, not just men. The point here is that we formed our group to

promote gender equality in order to create a better community for all. (June 19, 2007)

To promote gender equality, the mission of AAHWM is “to strengthen Hmong families through education and leadership development for women, girls, and families,” according to Lee Vang. To achieve this mission, AAHWM over the years adopted three major programs: a health program, a youth and culture program, and a community development program.

One way to empower Hmong women is to focus on the issue of health care, an important concern for women, especially young girls who are still in schools. According to K. Yang, an employee, AAHWM, has collaborated with both public and private health care providers and placed a high priority on health care issues: educating women and girls about contraception, childbirth, childcare, mental health, diabetes, nutrition, and physical education.

To build self-esteem and confidence, the youth and cultural program has provided courses on Hmong history, arts, dance, and after-school tutoring for girls and boys. To continue providing these services, according to Lee Vang, the program established and has maintained an inter-organizational network with the AmeriCorps program; the Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning; the Minneapolis Public Schools; and other Southeast Asian nonprofit organizations. To encourage and motivate Hmong girls, AAHWM developed its motto: “education now and babies later,” explained Lee Vang. Successful Hmong American women who are positive role models are invited to talk to the clients of AAHWM. In addition,



recognizing the importance of parents, the first teachers of their children, AAHWM also offers services to both parents and children, educating parents on how to help their school-aged children, especially girls, to succeed in school, and educating children on how to listen to and respect their parents.

Finally, in order to provide leadership training to Hmong women, AAHWM developed a community empowerment program, in the belief that it was vital for women to assume leadership positions. According to K. Vang, this program has included leadership training and efforts to promote economic self-sufficiency. The leadership-training program has provided women and girls courses on leadership skills, responsibilities, and the values of volunteerism in both Hmong and American organizations. In addition, to help Hmong women to become economically self-reliant, the AAHWM developed a self-sufficiency program, which provides training, and connects women to businesses and professionals. K. Ya explained, “To redeem our women’s dignity in our community, women need special attention in economic development so that they can become business owners and professionals.” A visit to AAHWM’s website in September 2012 indicates the following programming areas: Farming Education, Fishing Education, Health Education, Leadership Development and Social Justice.

According to information accessible on the Minnesota Attorney General’s website, AAHWM had total revenues ranging from \$400,000-\$600,000 between 2008-2011. The organization’s total revenues were \$408,320 in the fiscal year ending December 31, 2011, which was the most recent financial report that was available at the

time of this writing. In 2011, AAHWM reported receiving \$116,250 in Direct Public Support (which includes contributions from the public and foundation grants), \$292,070 in Government Grants and \$0 in Other Revenues.

### **Discussion**

This paper has shown some of the ways Hmong organizations in Saint Paul have changed over time in order to continue to remain financially healthy and serve emerging needs in the Hmong and broader communities. While YWA has remained primarily a clan-self help association reliant only on the economic support and volunteer time of its members, LCFM, HAP and AAHWM have shifted their programming and funding strategies in recent years to meet the changing interests of funders and to respond to changing priorities identified in the Hmong and wider immigrant and refugee communities. In recent years, AAHWM has initiated programs to assist Hmong farmers and advocate for social justice for Hmong and Asian women and refugees and immigrants in partnership with a coalition of other local non-profits. LCFM and HAP have moved beyond a strong focus on self-sufficiency and vocational training programs for Hmong refugees to adult basic education and social services programs for other more recently arriving immigrant and refugees in Saint Paul including Karen and Bhutanese. All three agencies have also developed programs in recent years with the goal of addressing emerging issues in the Hmong and Southeast Asian communities including chemical dependency, health disparities and youth delinquency. In terms of funding strategy, HAP stands out among the studied organizations, as a result of its intensive efforts in recent years to develop a range of “Other Revenues” including a

transportation company run as a “social enterprise” to support the ongoing operations of the organization independent of government contracts and foundation income.

In these respects, LCFM, HAP and AAHWM support Werbner’s (1985) thesis noted above which posits that ethnic organizations with ambiguous missions and multiple interests in social, cultural and political issues are more likely to be able to sustain themselves over the long haul. Indeed, numerous Hmong organizations have also emerged in the Twin Cities area over the past three decades but have not survived beyond more than a few years in many cases. These organizations have included numerous agencies with somewhat narrower missions focused on providing youth and women’s related services, arts activities and veterans’ support. Hein’s (1997) prediction that only the Indochinese ethnic associations that could adjust well to carry out the goals of their clients and funders (private and public) would be able to survive seems prescient.

At the same time, this study has shown that Vang’s (2010) historical assessment that the emergence of Hmong American organizations in the 1980s was strongly influenced by clan affiliation, gender, generation and perspectives on homeland politics still has some relevance for understanding Hmong organizations today. The death of General Vang Pao in early January 2011 led to a power vacuum and a very public struggle for control of LCFM. YWA and other local clan associations in the Twin Cities continued to be active and very relevant as forms of social networking and support for their members, functions that have also, it should be noted, been increasingly filled in recent years by the local Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA)

and other churches among the growing Hmong Christian community in the Twin Cities. Compared to LCFM, HAP has probably benefitted in the eyes of local funders over the past several years as being perceived as less focused on homeland politics and clan affiliation in its leadership structure. That said, HAP also has had its own internal issues in recent years which were in part related to public disagreements over the then board of directors' dismissal of a long-time Executive Director.

### **Conclusion**

It should be noted that due in part to its modest, exploratory goals this primarily descriptive, qualitative study has several limitations. First of all, the research only examined a limited number of Hmong organizations based in Saint Paul. A more detailed study would ideally comparatively assess a larger number of Hmong organizations in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area as well as California, Wisconsin and other states including those in states with emerging Hmong communities including North Carolina, Alaska, Oklahoma and Arkansas. A larger number of organizations in a variety of geographic areas and the inclusion of quantifiable variables including longitudinal assessments of organizational budgets and service population sizes would likely increase the generalizability of findings. In sum, more detailed longitudinal research on multiple Hmong organizations in different geographic settings utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures would be very valuable.

In addition, the inclusion of comparative variables that could be utilized as measurements of organizational effectiveness in areas of program service delivery would likely provide useful information about the relative contributions of Hmong

organizations in terms of important community issues including the reduction of poverty, the promotion of self-sufficiency and the reduction of health disparities.

Despite these admitted limitations to the present study, it is the author's hope that future researchers will find the data and analysis presented here useful for understanding of the ongoing evolution of Hmong organizations as well as the structure of Hmong American community life more generally. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will have some relevance for the broader understanding of ethnic organizations and the ways they evolve to respond to changing communities and structural circumstances.

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