



Hmong Migration to the West and the Politics of U.S. Refugee Resettlement Policies

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Introduction

- The goals of this presentation are to:
 - Provide a brief history of 20th century global politics affecting the Hmong;
 - Review US refugee policies and Hmong migration patterns; and
 - Provide a critique of Hmong American and Asian American Racial and Ethnic Identity formation.

Questions

- How have the Hmong participated in global politics during?
- How did their decision to take part in America's communist containment affect their lives during the 1960s and early 1970s and consequently their future?
- What policies and programs existed for Hmong refugees?
- How have Hmong refugees responded to refugee policies over time?
- How does the category "refugee" complicate and contradict Asian American racial and identity formation?

20th Century Global Politics Affecting the Hmong: The Struggle to Control Indochina

- **French late comer to colonialism in SE Asia**
 - Portuguese (trading posts since 15th Century)
 - Spanish (Phillipines 16th Century)
 - Dutch (Indonesia 17th Century)
 - British (Malaysia late 18th Century)
- **French colonialism beginning in mid 19th Century**
 - Vietnam-1861 south region and 1882 all of Vietnam-after close to 1000 year of Chinese rule
 - Cambodia-protectorate 1863
 - Laos-1893-considered least important colony

- During 6 decades of colonial rule, the French made little effort to develop Laos, economically, socially or culturally-few roads, no high schools established

French generated revenue in four ways:

1. Head tax on all males age 18-60;
2. Taxing sale of opium, alcohol, and salt;
3. Requiring each adult male to perform unpaid *corvée* labor (15-20 days a year-clearing jungles, removing rocks from rivers, building roads, etc)
4. Establishing a government monopoly on opium

Did Hmong and others quietly accept such harsh treatments?

- Anti-French uprising in southern Laos from 1901-1907
- 1919-1921-Hmong rebelled against French colonist until French created Hmong *tasseng* (district) at Nong Het near Lao-Vietnamese border and promoted Hmong leaders to govern their own villages
- Autonomous district created tension between the three main Hmong clans (Lo, the Ly and the Moua) because each wanted the chief position

- Some power sharing between Lo and Ly clans until 1922, but clash between clans, increased division with Hmong population---each supporting different sides during political conflicts
- Beginning in 1940s-Touby Lyfoung and supporters sided with the French colonial regime, but Faydang Lo and supporters were involved in movement for Lao independence
- In 1940, Japan began stationing troops in Indochina, mainly as a staging ground for attacking the Nationalist Chinese regime
- In 1944, toward end of WWII, Free French under Charles de Gaulle gained support from Touby Lyfong and supporters to recolonize Laos

- Japan asked each of the SE Asian nations to declare their independence-under Japanese pressure, Lao king declared independence although initially called on Lao people to rise up against the Japanese
- 1946-1954, The First Indochina War-waged by Communist forces against re-imposed French colonial rule, fought primarily on Vietnamese soil, but some battles in Laos
- Although more Hmong sided with the French, a substantial minority under Faydang Lo supported the Communist Pathet Lao

- The French organized Touby Lyfong followers into the Meo Maquis and used them as frontline fighters
- 1953, France granted Laos full independence
- May 8, 1954, French defeat at Dien Bien Phu by Viet Minh forces, ending 80 years of colonial rule (80% of French costs financed by US).

(Chan, 1993).

- 1954 Geneva Accord declared Laos as a neutral country and stipulated that no other foreign troops could be stationed in Laos, with the exception of 1500 French military advisors
- US created Program Evaluation Office (PEO) in 1955, staffed by retired military officers, to administer aid—dressed as civilians, but trained Laotian police and Royal Lao Army
- By 1957, Lao leaders attempted to to form a coalition government that included pro-Americans, nonaligned centrists, and pro-Communists
- US unhappy with coalition government because it included Communists—American policy makers wanted not a neutralist Laos but one that was strongly pro-American

- The US spent more than \$3 million to influence the National Assembly election in 1958, but to its surprise, Pathet Lao candidates won the majority of the seats and Prince Souphanouvaong received the largest number of votes
- US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) created the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI), consisting of young politicians who were pro-American and declared Communism as the number-one enemy—Americans violated the 1954 accord by directly training Laotian troops
- US gave up pretense of abiding by the 1954 accord and established a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) on April 19, 1961.

The Hmong as America's Foot Soldiers during the Secret War in Laos, 1961-1973

- No official declaration of war by Congress, activities conducted with knowledge of only a few foreign policy elites;
- American soldiers were not deployed, only military personnel to train Laotians and direct activities;
- U.S. based its bombers across border in Thailand.

Why were the Hmong contacted?

- During earlier military training with the Royal Lao army, Green Berets found the Hmong and other highlanders effective fighters
- Vang Pao, who led the Meo Maquis in the early 1950s, had a reputation for having led two raids against the North Vietnamese forces that had penetrated into Laos

(Hamilton-Merritt, 1992)

What were the Hmong promised?

IMMEDIATELY

- Immediately received weapons, food, and medical supplies.

FUTURE

- If successful in pushing North Vietnamese forces back, Americans would help as much as possible;
- If suffer defeat, Americans would “find a new place” where they could help the Hmong;
- An autonomous kingdom

How did their decision to take part in America's communist containment efforts affect their living conditions, and consequently their future?

- More than 100,000 Hmong had to be evacuated from their villages as war intensified;
- Disrupted farming activities, resulting in total reliance on American food supplies;
- Population concentration increased access to education for some, thus increasing Hmong literacy rate;
- American withdrawal led to Hmong persecution, in particular leaders with military rank, by communist regime.

US Refugee Policies & Among Migration Patterns

- Immigration policy (serve interest of the nation) vs. refugee policy (legal and moral obligation)
- Since WW II, refugee policies were *ad hoc*
- Cold War-U.S. accepted only refugees from communist countries
- Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975-refugees from Vietnam & Cambodia

- Act extended to Laotians in June 1976. First wave were those with education, their families, and/or those working directly with Americans; some airlifted while thousands journey on foot
- Refugee Act of 1980-permanent and systematic procedure for admission of refugees
- Act established U.S. Refugee Program (USRP) in SE Asia to prepare SE Asians for resettlement
- Of the more than 100,000 Hmong refugees resettled in the U.S., slightly more than half came before 1982, with 1980 as the peak year (27,242)

- From 1990 to 2000, U.S. Hmong population increased from 94,000 to 186,000 (Census)
- California-largest Hmong population, but Minnesota (Twin Cities) has the highest concentration
- Policies dispersed refugees, but chain migration enabled Hmong refugees to reconstruct community in various locations throughout the country
- Refugee lives are shaped by the mere fact that they are political subjects- policy of dispersal to lessen burden on local communities and to make refugees less visible (Palumbo-Liu, 1999)

Hmong Americans & Asian American Racial and Identity Formation

- As people from Asia, Hmong refugees were funneled in the Asian American racial category, and were subjected to anti-Asian discriminatory practices
- Sociological/anthropological studies highlight Hmong peoples' dependency on public assistance, resulting in the Hmong being considered unfit for the neoliberal "model minority" label
- Still others argue that Hmong culture is static and unchanging when in fact culture changes as it moves across space and time.

Conclusion

- An unintended consequence of international politics in S.E. Asia during the 20th century enabled the Hmong, a stateless people, to be placed on the global radar;
- While refugee lives are shaped by the mere fact that they are political subjects, such status also enabled them to reconstruct thriving diasporic communities throughout the west;
- While racialization processes place Hmong refugees within Asian America, the neoliberal model minority myth has disciplined Americans, both those of Asian descent and non-Asians, to highlight the difficulties the Hmong experience in America, such as welfare dependency, that further alienate them from the model minority label.

- How, then, can we explain the enormous success of Hmong entrepreneurs, high civic engagement in certain locations, and increasing number of college students, in particular women students?
- How do we explain the ways in which illiterate parents have raised very successful children?
- How do we explain the image of “primitive” Hmong women when in fact Hmong women have participated in “unexpected” work areas prior to migration?
- This themes/topics covered in this conference complicates and contradicts such images and brings to light the agency that Hmong women have exercised before and after migration to the West.