

**From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate:
A Case Study of a Hmong American Woman's Challenge**

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Abstract

This paper explores the contested nature of Hmong women's traditional roles and the recent emergence of Hmong American women leaders by discussing Senator Mee Moua, who was elected to the Minnesota State Legislature in January 2002. She became the first Hmong American state legislator in the United States.¹ The family and kinship system are the backbone of the Hmong community, around which Hmong culture is organized. The Hmong recognize kinship through the male line, and the household is the basic economic unit in the patriarchal Hmong social system.² This study was intended to find out how Mee Moua perceives her identity in working with her constituents and the Hmong people in her community, why the patriarchal Hmong community in St. Paul supported Mee Moua's campaign, and how she earned the broad support of a diverse constituency in defeating a candidate that had been handpicked by St. Paul's mayor. I argue that ethnic identity and the presentation of individuality as "Mee Moua" combined to make this Hmong American woman a successful bridge between two distinctive cultures.³

¹ Mee Moua was the first Hmong American state legislator in the United States. Prior to Mee Moua's election, Choua Lee was on the Saint Paul School board (1992- 1995) while Hmong were also elected to other city-wide offices in Wisconsin, Minnesota, California and Nebraska.

² Nancy D. Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), p.29.

³ The analysis made in this paper is based on the author's view as a non-Hmong researcher.

Introduction

The election of Mee Moua signaled a new status for the Hmong community as reported by several local newspapers in Minnesota.⁴ Many Americans and Minnesotans at the time still did not know much if anything about who the Hmong were, and how they had ended up in the United States. The dual identity that Mee Moua has experienced by living in two different cultures guided this study.⁵ This paper shows how maintaining a Hmong identity and keeping a balance of both ethnic identity and a strong sense of individuality has enabled Mee Moua to be a "bridge" between two very different cultures.

Semi-structured informal interviews and e-mail exchanges were conducted with Senator Mee Moua and her current and past staffers. The author presented an earlier version of this paper at the Hmong Women's National Conference in September 2005.⁶

The Hmong Journey to the United States

Indochinese immigrants came to the United States from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after the Vietnam War ended. The United States had tried to intervene in the area, fearing Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. However, the failure to "contain" Communism through the Vietnam War caused political turmoil and forced millions to flee their homeland.⁷

The Hmong originally came from an area of China, along the lower reaches of the Yellow River. They were forced to flee southward to Indochina after their defeat in a rebellion against the Qing Dynasty in the 1860s. Since that time, they have had no country to call their own. In the twentieth century, they fought the Communists alongside French and American forces.⁸ The price the Hmong paid for supporting the United States was a heavy one. As the war

⁴ Bill Salisbury, "Mee Moua: We really Belong Here," *Pioneer Press* (MN), February 5, 2002; Karl J. Karlson, "Mee Moua Wins Seat in St. Paul, Makes History," *Pioneer Press* (MN), January 30, 2002; and Frank Wu, "A Brand-New Hero," *AsianWeek Archives*, March 8 – March 14, 2002, http://www.asianweek.com/2002_03_08/news.mee.html (accessed on February 15, 2005).

⁵"From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case Study of the First Hmong American State Legislator, Mee Moua" Thesis submitted to the Graduate School of American Studies, Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan in March 2006.

⁶ Hmong Women's National Conference at the University of Minnesota, September 2005

⁷ Paul Ong and John M. Liu, "U.S. Immigration Policies and Asian Migration," *Contemporary Asian America*, Min Zhou, et. al., (eds.), (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p.11.

⁸ Lillian Faderman and Ghia Xiong, *I Begin My Life All Over*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p.4.

ended, the Pathet Lao Communists formed the Lao People's Democratic Republic, which set up reeducation labor camps to identify those who had helped the United States. As a consequence, many Hmong people had to flee to Thailand to avoid the genocidal campaigns by the Communists in Laos and Vietnam, and they spent several years in refugee camps before they found places to resettle.⁹

From the early 1980's, the Thai authorities started to discourage immigration by closing Ban Vinai refugee camp in 1983. The Thai government's policy gradually became more severe toward "unwelcome visitors," trying to force them into a third country or sending them back to Laos.¹⁰

The Hmong in the United States

Since the United States government granted the Hmong a special immigrant status as past allies in the 1970s, about 130,000 Hmong refugees have come to the United States in different eras of resettlement. Following the U.S. refugee replacement policy, Indochinese refugees, including the Hmong, were dispersed to all fifty states, a policy intended to avoid imposing an excessive financial burden on any single region and to minimize the negative impacts on receiving communities."¹¹ The Hmong then began their second and third migrations within the United States in search of better living conditions, and more favorable employment opportunities with a strong desire for family reunification. That process resulted in the establishment of several large Hmong American communities in certain states, such as in California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.¹² According to *Hmong 2000 Census Publication: Data and Analysis*, in Western states, such as California, a lower rate of Hmong population growth was

⁹ John Duffy et al., ed., Donald A. Ranard, *The Hmong: An Introduction to Their History and Culture*, Culture Profile No.18, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, The Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2004), p.10.

¹⁰ Faderman, p.10; E-Mail from Mark Pfeifer, PhD, Director, Hmong Resource Center Library, Hmong Cultural Center, "Updated Wat Tham Krabak Hmong Resettlement". (The number of total arrivals to Minnesota during 2004 – 2005 were 4,953.)

¹¹ Ruben G. Rumbaut, "Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian Americans," in *Contemporary Asian America*, (New York; New York University Press, 2000), p.183.

¹² Sucheng Chan, *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p.59.

especially apparent over the 1990s, while explicit shifts toward certain regions of the Midwest and the South were noted. The census figures over the 1990s displayed a trend among Hmong Americans to move to places where they could secure available employment.¹³

When the Hmong lived in Laos, they survived by following swidden agriculture,¹⁴ but their new life in the United States required them to adjust to an environment that did not support their agricultural traditions. As a result, the Hmong extended family system has been dissolving, even though they have tried to maintain strong emotional and familial ties.¹⁵ In the American culture, in which both men and women are expected to make their own decisions, Hmong women have come to express their own ideas, and they have become independent socially and economically. Hmong men are losing much of their economic and social authority.¹⁶ One reason for this change is the decline in the number of high-wage manufacturing jobs, a situation that has weakened the position of Hmong men as sole breadwinners, and in turn, elevated the economic and social standing of Hmong women.¹⁷ The Hmong-American community is also changing. The power dynamics between the generations and between the genders are being transformed.¹⁸ The Hmong link the preservation of gender and age hierarchies to their ethnic identity.¹⁹

The Hmong Tradition in the United States

The Hmong people have undergone years of war, oppression, and dislocation. Therefore, individual survival is often equated with group survival. A Hmong person belongs to a family,

¹³ Mark Pfeifer and Serge Lee, "Hmong Population, Demographic, Socioeconomic and Educational Trends in the 2000 Census" in Hmong National Development, Inc. and Hmong Cultural Center, *Hmong 2000 Census Publication: Data and Analysis*, (Washington, D.C. and Saint Paul: 2004), p.4.

¹⁴ A. Terry Rambo and Tran Duc Vien, "Social Organization and the Management of Natural Resources: A Case Study of Tat Hamlet, a Da Bac Tay Ethnic Minority Settlement in Vietnam's Northwestern Mountains." *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.39, No.3, 1-26. Note: "Swidden agriculture" is also called "slash-and-burn agriculture" or "shifting cultivation."

¹⁵ Ibid. pp.51-52.

¹⁶ Nancy D. Donnelly, in *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp.74-75.

¹⁷ Shirley Hune, "Doing Gender with a Feminist Gaze: Toward a Historical Reconstruction of Asian America," in *Contemporary Asian America*, Min Zhou, et al., (eds.), p.422.

¹⁸ Dia Cha, "Hmong and Lao Refugee Women: Reflections of a Hmong-American Woman Anthropologist," *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005, 6, p.13.

¹⁹ Chan, p.58.

that family belongs to a clan, and the clan belongs to the Hmong people.²⁰ The family is at the core of traditional Hmong society, and a typical household consists of people from several generations.

There are about nineteen Hmong clans, including the Chang, Xiong, Lee, Moua, Vang and Thao. People are identified by and trace their ancestry through their clan names. The clans share a tradition of ancestral worship and ritual practices.²¹ People are identified by their clan names. The Hmong hold closely to their clans and invest a great deal of trust in clan leaders. The clan system is socially and culturally important. Each clan is directed by a group of leaders that oversee relations with other clans. These leaders are often mediators in disputes, and assist families in solving their problems. Clan affiliation, for example, can help refugees to find local support groups.²²

The Hmong clan leaders used to perform various traditional rituals and ceremonies through which they worshipped the spirits. However, as Chan claims, some Hmong are no longer certain about the efficacy of their beliefs and rituals because the American environment is not as suitable for some of these traditional rituals.²³ In consequence, Hmong clan leaders perform the traditional ceremonies less often, and what used to be "rituals" have become "performances" such as those during the Hmong New Year. Thus in some aspects, "the power formerly held by the larger clan has also declined."²⁴

Nevertheless, older Hmong resist change because they believe that they can remain Hmong as long as they preserve the social relationships within the household and categorize each member according to gender and age. As a consequence, conflicts between the old and the young Hmong and between men and women are becoming more problematic and inter-related

²⁰ John Duffy, et al., p.12.

²¹ Ibid., p.12.

²² Timothy Dunnigan, "Segmentary Kinship in An Urban Society: The Hmong of St. Paul – Minneapolis," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Volume 55 (3): pp.126-134, July 1987.

²³ Chan, p.52.

²⁴ Ibid., p.52.

Note: The author admits that the issue of clan leadership and rituals may be argued on the ground that kinship through the clan system in Hmong community still plays an important role on uniting people together. Prasit Leepreecha, "Kinship That Binds Transnational Hmong Ethnic Group," at Kyoto Symposium, November 2006.

because of the way age and gender are both deeply molded social aspects of the Hmong identity.²⁵

In explaining gender issues in the Hmong social hierarchy, Donnelly uses several examples, such as where people stand in a room, their posture and actions, and how Hmong women avoid eye contact. According to her, visible cues such as these indicate the female's position in Hmong society.²⁶ She concludes that the female is considered inferior in Hmong society since "females in each age category are placed beneath male contemporaries, because they are female, and women always owe respect to men."²⁷ However, she also finds a counterview among many Hmong that asserts that men and women actually occupy different spheres and pursue different activities, both of which are equally essential to Hmong family life.²⁸

Back in Laos, a woman's role was largely limited to the domestic sphere. Thus, very few Hmong women leaders can be found in the traditional Hmong culture.²⁹ Gender inequality continues to be an important social issue in the Hmong American community.³⁰ However, Hmong American women have come to realize that they can have autonomy in the United States, and this knowledge has dramatically changed their way of thinking.

This change has also been caused by various practical realities. For example, many Hmong men lack recognized work skills and are not able to support their families. As a result, women have entered the workforce despite the low wage jobs that are open to them.

²⁵ Donnelly, pp.9, 86, 184.

²⁶ Ibid., p.9.

²⁷ Ibid., p.p.29-33, 184, and Dia Cha, "Hmong and Lao Refugee Women: Reflections of a Hmong-American Woman Anthropologist," *Hmong Studies Journal*, Volume 6, 2005, pp. 10, 13, 14, 23-24.

²⁸ Ibid., p.10.

²⁹ Chao Fang, "Inter-generational Values Differences Between Younger and Older Hmong in the United States," Ph.D. dissertation, United States International University, San Diego, 1997, p.72; and Chan, p.53. The author also thanks a blind reviewer for providing an alternative view that emphasizes the important and intrinsic role that Hmong women have played for centuries in family economic activities outside the home and in social and religious activities in Hmong community life.

³⁰ Jennifer Ann Yang, "Marriage by Capture in the Hmong Culture: The Legal Issue of Cultural Rights Versus Women's Rights," *Law and Society Review*, Volume III, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2004. pp.38-40.

Consequently, rapid changes in the concept of what is "family" and a transfer of power from Hmong men to women has occurred.³¹ These factors may have created instability within many Hmong American families as the group tries to preserve their traditions in the United States.

Research Questions

Research Questions

The following three research questions were of interest in this study.

A. Identity

What is commonly called the "1.5 generation" is the group of people who were born but were not raised outside of the United States. The 1.5 generation is in some respects quite Americanized, but its members find that they need to straddle the Hmong and the American cultures. Mee Moua is very proud of her ethnicity but still prefers to be viewed as an "individual." *How then does Mee Moua, who remains active in both the Hmong American and the American communities perceive her "double identity,"³² and maneuver between them when working with her constituents and others in her community?*

B. Hmong Patriarchal Social System

The traditional Hmong concept of gender holds that women are inferior to men in their social status.³³ Females in each category are placed beneath male contemporaries, because they are female, and women are perceived to owe respect to men."³⁴ This view is often criticized in the United States because Hmong Americans are living in an American society in which Americans take the equality of sexes as a matter of course. With the increase of the Hmong population, there are many interchanges between the two communities through school and community activities. Nevertheless, it is still difficult for Americans to understand some aspects of Hmong traditions. The election of a Hmong woman to the Minnesota State Legislature and the fact that her campaign was mostly organized by the Hmong American community was an important news story in the United States. *So why and how did the traditional patriarchal Hmong community in St. Paul support Mee Moua's campaign in 2002?*

C. Representation

As the first Hmong American State Legislator, Mee Moua is often exposed to media coverage whenever there is an incident affecting Hmong Americans. One example is the case

³¹ Chan, p.53.

³² Confirmed by the author in an interview with Mee Moua in November 2005.

³³ Chan, p.53.

³⁴ Donnelly, p184.

of a Hmong hunter who shot and killed six White hunters in Wisconsin's north woods in November of 2004. Due to these unfortunate events, Hmong Americans suddenly emerged as a community that was of interest to many people. Mee Moua was asked by the mainstream media to comment on the incident as a representative of the Hmong American community. *How then did the ethnically diverse constituency of District 67 of St. Paul come to select Mee Moua to be their representative?*

Background of Mee Moua ³⁵

Mee Moua was born in Laos in a remote village in Xieng Khouang Province in 1969. When her father was 16, he joined a medical training program that was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). During the Vietnam War, the CIA was stationed in Laos, and the Hmong were recruited as soldiers to help American pilots who were shot down. Mee Moua's father was a medic assigned to treat these soldiers and was sent to villages via helicopter to set up a medical complex. Her family moved from village to village as her father was transferred by the USAID. Because of her father's service to the CIA, his family members were branded as pro-American sympathizers.

When the Communists took control of Vietnam and Laos, following the fall of Saigon in April 1975, they began looking for American sympathizers. Mee Moua's father was warned that he was in danger of being arrested. The family escaped one night. At the Laos-Thailand border, her father used all the money he had to bribe a Laotian fisherman to take them across the Mekong River to Thailand. The family then lived in the Ban Vinai Refugee Camp from 1975 to 1978 when they became eligible for resettlement in the United States.

Upon their arrival in the United States, they lived in Providence, Rhode Island, they then moved to the smaller city of Appleton, Wisconsin. As the only Asian children in the town, Mee Moua and her siblings were often harassed by the children in their neighborhood. This

³⁵ Note: Personal data was collected from private interviews by Taeko Yoshikawa, (St. Paul: March 9, 2005 and September 13, 2005); the transcript of Sen. Mee Moua's interview on the Hmong Oral Project by Prof. P. Hillmer, Concordia University, St. Paul: February 21, 2005; and *Blog for America*, "Interview with Minnesota State Sen. Mee Moua," October 9, 2003, <http://blog.deanforamerica.com/archives/001810.html>, (accessed February 15, 2005).

harsh experience later gave her both the strength and the incentive to work in the public sector. In an interview for the Hmong Oral History Project conducted by Concordia University of St. Paul, Mee Moua describes how her parents' openness and non-traditional way of thinking affected her sense of being. Unlike many Hmong parents, Mee Moua's parents had the same expectations of their sons and daughters, and they treated their children equally.

Mee Moua received her undergraduate degree from Brown University in Rhode Island and her master's degree in Public Affairs from the Lyndon Baines Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. As a college activist, she learned how to talk to people in power, and in this way, she "stole" the bravado of students who grew up with a lot of confidence. Many of those students came from affluent families. She saw this realization as a great cultural transition from her disadvantaged background to a more privileged one. She found for the first time in her life an environment where people spoke without fear of retribution, and as if they really had power. She was inspired by this experience because she realized that in America, there is a way to open a "gate" of opportunity for those from minority backgrounds.

College life taught Mee Moua the meaning of political identity. In describing how she identifies herself now, she says "being Hmong, being Hmong-American, or being Asian-American is not enough; you have to be a person of color, and on top of that you have to be a person of color who happens to be a woman." Identifying her different identities affected Mee Moua considerably because each identity carried its own political advantages and disadvantages. She learned that being poor in America could be an advantage because it could entitle people to certain protections and rights, and did not mean that they were just "trash that people could step on."

Mee Moua decided to earn her master's degree at the University of Texas. She became interested in the relationship between poverty and education, and conducted research on Hmong adolescent gangs in St. Paul. While in Texas, she was inspired by her professor, former U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, an experience that led her to pursue a political career. Her

academic training and her membership in Students on Financial Aid (SOFA) led her to become a community activist and fostered her ability.³⁶ She received a law degree from the University of Minnesota Law School in 1997.

In addition to working as a community activist, Mee Moua's friendships with the deceased U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone and Congressman Bruce Vento also greatly encouraged her to enter politics. In addition, the experience of working in her uncle Neal Thao's campaign to join the St. Paul School Board taught her some of the essential elements of the political process.³⁷ Paul Wellstone was the ideal mentor for Mee Moua in terms of teaching her how to run an effective campaign. He was deeply committed to the Hmong-American community, and worked hard to pass legislation that entitled Hmong veterans and their widows to take the U.S. citizenship test in the Hmong language. From Wellstone, Mee Moua learned about the strategy of mobilizing disadvantaged people outside the normal electorate.³⁸ Indeed, Wellstone showed Mee Moua how to organize her own "door-knocking-campaign."

Ms. Pakou Hang, who served as Mee Moua's campaign manager, had been hired by Wellstone to work in the Hmong community, an experience that helped Pakou Hang plan Mee Moua's strategy. Wellstone hired Pakou Hang because she knew the patterns of Hmong society and could help "build political consciousness in the Hmong community" where events are organized through families, not churches or community groups.³⁹ This cooperation produced a win-win result for both Wellstone and Mee Moua. Mee Moua succeeded in overwhelming her opponents with "one of the most formidable political organizations the East Side of St. Paul had ever seen" according to an article in a political magazine.⁴⁰ Her network

³⁶ Sara Dady, "Senator Mee Moua: Working in the System," *The Opinion*, (St. Paul: William Mitchell College of Law Student Newspaper, September 2002), Volume 2, p.1.

³⁷ Searching for Asian America, "Asian American Politicians – Mee Moua", Asian American Field Reports, PBS, http://www.pbs.org/searching/aap_mmoua.html (accessed June 7, 2005).

³⁸ Harold Meyerson, "Politics with People, Reinvented: Paul Wellstone Wants to Win It Clean-With Zeal, Volunteers and a New-Model, Old-Fashioned Campaign," in *The American Prospect*, Vol. 13: Issue 17 (The American Prospect Inc., September 23, 2002) (data taken from Questia Media America Inc.)

³⁹ *Ibid.*, September 23, 2002.

⁴⁰ Christopher Conte, "Diversity in Action: the First Hmong Senator," *July/August 2002 State*

of family and friends rallied the Hmong community along with more than two hundred volunteers who visited households, circulated literature and made telephone calls in the district during the campaign.

How did her campaign strategy differ from those of other candidates? An answer can be found in the documentary, *The Time is Right for Mee*, which documented the last two months of her three-month long campaign in 2002.⁴¹ The clip notes that Mee Moua's "door-knocking campaign" was unusual because it allowed many constituents to meet the candidate in person and to have the candidate ask for their vote.⁴²

In addition to this campaign strategy, Moua's status as an Ivy League graduate raised her profile among voters.⁴³ Moua often highlighted her strong interest in supporting education, saying that "education is a linchpin for everyone who wants to achieve the American dream."⁴⁴ At the same time, working as a lobbyist in the State Capitol in Minnesota gave her opportunities to learn negotiation skills.

District 67 of St. Paul, Minnesota

Senate District 67, which covers much of St. Paul's East Side, is heavily Democratic. Historically, the district has attracted immigrants. Recent immigrant communities in the district include the Hmong, (the world's second largest urban center of the Hmong population in St. Paul), and Somalis.⁴⁵ District 67's population is composed mainly of blue collar people. As a child growing up in a poor immigrant family, Mee Moua knew what it was like to have gone through hard times as a minority. These poor working-class people needed leaders who

Legislatures Magazine, (accessed November 20, 2005).

<http://www.ncsl.org/programs/pubs/702moua.htm>

⁴¹ Note: Not for sale, as of November 2005, (by the office of Sen. Mee Moua).

⁴² "The Time is Right for Mee," *City Pages*, Minneapolis/St. Paul – Movies, <http://www.citypages.com/movies/detail.asp?MID=7616> (accessed November 3, 2006); Kao Lee, "Senator Mee Moua Documentary," *Hmong Today*, February 3, 2006, <http://www.hmongtoday.com/displaynews.asp?ID=2140> (accessed November 10, 2006).

⁴³ *State Legislatures*, July-August 2002.

⁴⁴ Ibid., "Diversity Inaction: The First Hmong Senator; Mee Moua Typifies the Rich Contributions Foreign-born Lawmakers Are Bringing to the Legislative Institution", (July-August 2002 v28 i7 p44(4)).

⁴⁵ *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minnesota#Ethnic_groups.2FAncstry_groups, (accessed January 3, 2005).

would speak for them, and Mee Moua often welcomes visitors of all ethnicities to her office.

The following table shows the family income and composition for District 67 and the state of Minnesota:

Table 1: Composition of Families and Income of District 67 ⁴⁶

	District 67		Minnesota
Children under 18	24,783	33%	26%
Children of color (incl. Latino of any race)	15,847	21%	18%
Families with children	10,099		
Single parent families	3,963	39%	23%
Families with incomes under \$10,000*	1,346	13%	6%
Families with incomes between \$20,000 - \$30,000*	2,460	23%	18%
Families with incomes over \$200,000*	85	1%	6%
Families with children, incomes under 130% of poverty line (\$22,165 for a family of 4)	2,843	27%	11%
Families with children, incomes under 185% of poverty line (\$31,542 for a family of 4)	4,489	42%	19%

The Special Election of 2002

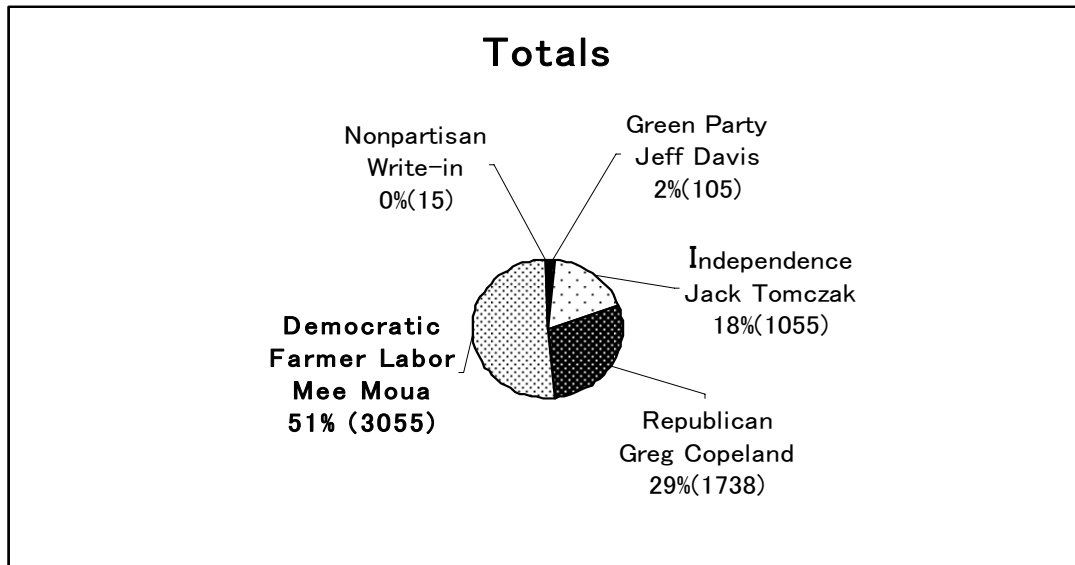
When former Minnesota State Senator Randy Kelly vacated his seat to run for mayor of Saint Paul, five Democratic-Farmer-Labor candidates competed for their party's nomination in the special primary election. Mee Moua was one of those candidates. The table below shows the results of the 2002 primary election.

Mee Moua	1,746 votes (43.96%)
Tim Mahoney	1,579 votes (39.75%)
Tom Dimond	318 votes (8.01%)
James Kielkopf	262 votes (6.60%)
Michele Ford	67 votes (1.69%).

⁴⁶ *This includes married couples without children. Source: Census 2000 data (Tabulations by CDF Minnesota).

In the following special election on January 29, 2002, Mee Moua defeated four opponents. According to *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Mee Moua gained the advantage to win “based on the solid Democratic voting history of St. Paul’s East Side.”⁴⁷

Table 2: Number of Votes Obtained ⁴⁸



Registered Voters: 30,790 (as of 7AM , January 29, 2002)

Voter Turnout: 5,975 (19.41%)

The people of St. Paul wondered how Mee Moua could have defeated the St. Paul mayor’s chosen successor, Tim Mahoney, considering all the barriers she faced to being elected. Most analysts assumed Mahoney would win a clear victory in the primary. Mee Moua was able to galvanize people of different ethnic backgrounds into voting for her. Several factors contributed to her success.

Mee Moua conducted a unique campaign about which her own political consultant had significant doubts. She reached out to what she calls, the “disfranchised/disconnected people”

⁴⁷ Karl J. Karlson, “St. Paul’s East Side/Mee Moua Wins DFL Primary Candidate Becomes Front-runner in Race to Fill Kelly’s Old Senate Seat,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press* (MN), (St. Paul: January 16, 2002, B1).

⁴⁸ *Election Reporting*, Minnesota Secretary of State, January 30, 2002.

of her precinct, who were the “most disadvantaged and distant from the political process.”⁴⁹ Some of these people were newly arrived immigrants, not necessarily the Hmong, who had little knowledge related to voting and registration because they did not speak English. Mee Moua knew there was a high likelihood that she might not win as a first-time candidate in a competitive political race. She decided to organize a grassroots campaign that registered new voters and got them to the polls on Election Day.⁵⁰ By recruiting 250 volunteers to visit the neighborhoods, Mee Moua reached out to these new arrivals, telling them where to go to vote and what to bring with them to the polls. On Election Day, she provided interpreters at the polls and drivers who drove elderly people to the voting stations.

Another factor in her favor was the power of the “1.5 generation” and the Hmong clan system. Her campaign team was composed of young Hmong professionals who were viewed as rising community leaders. In addition, Mee Moua called in her 70-plus cousins to work on the campaign. Most of these persons were of the “1.5 generation,” who were born either in Laos or in the refugee camps in Thailand, but had grown up in the United States. By mobilizing these young people, she reached out to citizens across all races and ethnicities in her district, and especially to the already under-served minorities.

As Portes et al. claim, “solidarity is built among immigrants who were put into a similar discriminatory difficult situation on their arrival, and these experiences become the primary basis of group solidarity, overwhelming other competing identifications, such as those based on class.”⁵¹ The constituents of District 67 elected Mee Moua because of the special character of the district, an ethnically heterogeneous district. Leaders were needed who could understand and embrace immigrants' feeling. In other words, people wanted a representative who could “voice” their thinking and with whom they could turn with their problems. That person did not necessarily have to be of the same ethnicity as long as the legislator and the constituents

⁴⁹ Mee Moua, “From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Hmong American Woman's Journey,” from a public lecture at Doshisha University, November 9, 2005.

⁵⁰ Pakou Hang, *Colorlines Magazine: Race, Action, Culture* (accessed April 24, 2005).

⁵¹ Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p.96.

could find common ground on the issues.

In the case of Mee Moua, the common denominators she shares with her constituents include strong concerns about education, housing, economic development and safety. All of these issues are very important to the district's welfare and to the improvement of living conditions in this area of St. Paul.

How then did Mee Moua present herself to her constituents? The proportion of the Hmong in District 67 was small, so Mee Moua could not solely depend on Hmong votes. Fenno, Jr. describes how representatives are seen by their constituents and what should be done to gain their trust.

"You can trust me because ... although I am not one of you ... I understand you. Qualification, identification, and empathy are all helpful in the building of constituent trust. To a large degree these three impressions are conveyed by the very fact of regular personal contact."⁵²

Fenno studied how House members present themselves in their districts. He claims that the ability to present effectively is an essential qualification for those who seek public office. His argument fits well with Mee Moua's grassroots campaign strategy, which was very theoretical and orthodox. The door-knocking strategy, using lawn signs in mid-winter in Minnesota, and wearing campaign T-shirts over coats were used to get the attention of voters and to showcase "Mee Moua" and her qualifications.

The key person involved in implementing Mee Moua's strategy was Pakou Hang. The political organization of Progressive Minnesota also was indispensable in helping the Mee Moua campaign through its community organizing, educational activities, and coalition building. Mee Moua could also count on the support of student and feminist groups in addition to many Hmong clan organizations and Mee Moua's close relatives.⁵³ In fact, some Hmong clan leaders initially objected to Mee Moua's campaign because they did not want her to lose

⁵² Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1978), p.60.

⁵³ Lee Pao Xiong, Director, Center for Hmong Studies, Concordia University, St. Paul, (Interviewed by the author on September 14, 2005).

face by being defeated and thus embarrassing the entire Hmong community. Therefore, in order to receive support from the Hmong-American community, Mee Moua had to tackle the belief that no one would vote for a Hmong woman.⁵⁴ Later on, some local Hmong clan leaders came to more fully realize the importance of Hmong people becoming politically relevant in the United States, and they actively began to support her campaign.

The Hmong clan structure worked effectively in the campaign fund-raising effort. Mee Moua also took advantage of Minnesota campaign law. The Minnesota Campaign Contribution Refund Law reimburses within any calendar year, an individual by up to \$50 and a couple by up to \$100 for a political donation to candidates who accept public financing. Members of the Hmong American community were asked to donate money with the promise that they would be reimbursed through their clans. Since the special election crossed two calendar years, people could donate twice. Many people also contributed their refunds.

Table 3 displays a breakdown of the "Report of Contributions to Eastsiders for Mee Moua" published by the Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board:⁵⁵

Table 3: Breakdown of Contributions to Mee Moua in the Year of 2002 ⁵⁶

Donor Type	Contribution Amount	Percentage
Non-Hmong	12,000.00	39.2%
Hmong	3,782.00	12.4%
Political Committees	14,825.00	48.4%
Total	\$30,607.00	100.0%

From these figures, it is noteworthy that Mee Moua received a significant majority of her financial support from outside of the Hmong community. She received donations from people of different ethnicities and political organizations, and by using the refund program, she was able to "tap into contributors who had never before given money to political candidates." This strategy was more important for Mee Moua than raising money because with this refund program, she could create "a brand new block of devoted voters who had never before felt that

⁵⁴ Mee Moua, (Interviewed by the author on November 9, 2005).

⁵⁵ Note: The grouping and the calculation was made from the donors' names.

⁵⁶ Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board.

they have a stake in the political process.”⁵⁷

As a Minnesota State Senator

Since Mee Moua was elected to the Senate, the importance of “political cohesiveness” has been emphasized in the Hmong community, and Hmong Americans are no longer viewed merely as a quiet minority in Minnesota.⁵⁸ With regards to the future possibility of Hmong Americans becoming a “Voting Bloc” with the influx of new Hmong refugees from Thailand, Lee Pao Xiong, the Director of Hmong Studies Center in St. Paul stated his view as follows:⁵⁹

“We have and will continue to be a strong voting bloc. The politicians know this and we know it. For example, during the last Senate and Presidential campaigns, both the Democratic Party and Republican Party sent Asian representatives to try to recruit the Hmong. Some of the campaigns went as far as hiring Hmong to help organize the Hmong votes.”

Likewise, Steward Kwoh and Mindy Hui of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center cite the importance of community power on outsiders:

“Political empowerment should be defined not only by the number of Asian Pacific Americans who hold elected offices, but also by the ability of our communities to influence the outcome of elections and development, therefore, it is necessary for Asian Americans to understand the experiences of other ethnic groups, such as African American and Latino officials as they have dramatically increased elected officials.”⁶⁰

Mee Moua's district has neither a sufficient Hmong nor Asian population; hence collaboration with other ethnic groups was a “must” for Mee Moua to win. Citing the need for Asian Americans to collaborate with other ethnic groups in order to emerge as a political bloc may not be a new idea, but Asian Americans may have more barriers to overcome to get elected,

⁵⁷ “Testimonial: Sen. Mee Moua, Minnesota,” *The Institute on Money in State Politics*, 2005. (provided by Sen. Mee Moua's office); Louansee Moua, Mee Moua's 2002 campaign manager (answered by e-mail, received on January 5, 2006.).

⁵⁸ Mee Moua, November 9, 2005, (Interviewed by the author).

⁵⁹ Lee Pao Xiong, Hmong Studies Center, Concordia University, St. Paul, (E-mail received on August 23, 2005).

⁶⁰ Steward Kwoh and Mindy Hui, “Empowering Out Communities: Political Policy,” *Policy for a Community At Risk*, (ed.), LEAP Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, (Los Angeles) 189-190.

such as the lack of qualified candidates, low voter turnout and racial discrimination; therefore, effective collaboration with other ethnic groups is absolutely necessary.

Lisa Tsai described how to become visible in a majority White district in her paper, "Emerging Power."⁶¹ Using Tsai's argument and considering that support from a White constituency was integral to Mee Moua's success, it becomes clear that because of her district's heterogeneous nature, she needed support from other ethnic communities besides the Hmong. A similar finding is found in the work of Carol Hardy-Fanta and others, all of which argue that "inter-minority coalition building may be more viable for elected officials of color who come from jurisdictions that are primarily majority-white."⁶² The viability of this hypothesis regarding people of color, especially Asian Americans living in a White dominant state as Minnesota depends on how many more multicultural leaders emerge in the future.

The result of Mee Moua's second election campaign⁶³ in November of 2002 substantiates this claim. She received 60% of the votes (11,568) against her opponent, Dave Racer who received 40% (7,648) of votes in District 67. In this election, we may take Mee Moua's victory as a sign of Hmong American empowerment which was built on a coalition of minorities. Actually, we may also say that Mee Moua helped make Hmong Americans care about politics, and more Hmong candidates have stood for public office since her election. In 2002, Cy Thao was elected State Representative in Minnesota, and Dr. Tony Vang became the first Hmong member of the Fresno, California School Board.⁶⁴ Mee Moua's victory has provided inspiration to other Hmong to run for elected office.

⁶¹ Lisa .S. Tsai, "Emerging Power: A Study on Asian American Political Candidates," *Asian American Policy Review* (Vol.IX:2000) 88-89.

⁶² Carol Hardy-Fanta, et. al., "Race, Gender, and Descriptive Representation: An Exploratory View of Multicultural Elected Leadership in the United States," prepared for the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, (Washington, D.C.: 2005), pp.14, 20; Karlson, "DFL: Moua All But Elected//Party Anticipating," History-Making Win," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, (St. Paul, 2002), p.3.

⁶³ Mee Moua had to run ten months after the Special Election in 2001.

⁶⁴ Richard Sennott, *Star Tribune* 2003, (provided by Sen. Mee Mou's office).

Fenichel Hanna Pitkin asks “when should men feel represented?”⁶⁵ Considering the meaning of “representation” and “symbol” in the case of Mee Moua, Pitkin’s thesis that “the symbol seems to be the recipient or object of feelings, expressions of feeling or actions intended for what it represents” seems to make sense.⁶⁶ In fact, the Hmong Americans in the Twin Cities became more visible through Mee Moua’s achievement, and “the culture and feeling of community by Hmong voters have unified them in a cohesive political force.”⁶⁷

Within the Hmong American community, Mee Moua’s victory has changed the concept of women’s activism, and more Hmong women have become visible by running for the St. Paul School Board and other public offices. In consequence, many Hmong clan leaders who still embrace traditional ideas have also accepted female activism in the political sphere.⁶⁸

Discussion

In the research questions, three interrelated issues – identity, a hierarchical social system, and representation were presented as possible barriers to Mee Moua’s elections to the State Senate.

Dual Identity – “Hmongness” versus “Mee Moua as an Individual”

How do people view Mee Moua’s dual identity? She is very proud of her “Hmongness,” but she also values her “individuality.” She admits that her individualist philosophy frustrates people who regard her as a “descriptive representative.” These people who see Mee Moua as a “descriptive representative” do not see her as a “Minnesota State Senator,” but rather just as a “representative of Hmong Americans.”

According to Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s concept of political “representation,” the activity

⁶⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd., 1967), p.9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.99.

⁶⁷ Murali Balaji, “St. Paul: Hmong a growing force in politics,” *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, December 2, 2002, <http://www.dfw.com/mid/pioneerpress/news/politics/4645423.htm?1c> (accessed January 30, 2005); *New MNDFL Website*, “Hmong a growing force in politics,” December 5, 2002, <http://www.dfl.org/index.asp> (accessed June 2, 2005).

⁶⁸ Note: At the Hmong Women’s National Conference held at University of Minnesota in September 2005, several presenters talked about changing leadership roles and political activism of women, which are occurring in the Hmong-American communities in the Twin Cities.

has no fixed meaning, and several theorists have a different concept of what it means. What then is the proper relation between a representative and her constituents? In her book, Pitkin cites a definition of representatives presented by Thomas Hobbes. He claims that "the representative is free to do whatever he pleases (at least so far as his constituents are concerned), but must also do what he thinks best, using his own judgment and wisdom, since he is chosen to make decisions for his constituents."⁶⁹

These theories are persuasive in understanding the need for "double identity." Having a double identity is crucial indeed for Mee Moua to maintain support as Senator of District 67 on the grounds that she has been successful in convincing her constituents that she has been working solely for the benefit of all of her constituents and not for some of them. Similarly, Robert A. Dahl describes the ambiguous relationship between leaders and constituents. He claims that because leaders are viewed from multiple positions, they can be considered as "a kind of ruling elite," but at the same time, if these same leaders are viewed from different aspects, they might appear as "captives of their constituents."⁷⁰ In assessing Mee Moua's political environment, the theories of Hobbes and Dahl illustrate very well why she needs to switch her identity to meet the specific situation.

To be a "Bridge"

Mee Moua spoke about her views on Asian American politics in an interview with *Blog of America* on October 9, 2003.⁷¹ In answer to a question about how her refugee experience has played a role in helping her formulate her policies as a State Senator in general and specifically for Asian Americans, the Senator answered that her identity was shaped by many factors, not only by being a refugee, but also by being a displaced person, and a person of color. Growing up in a very homogeneous white community, together with her parents' unconventional practice of giving a great deal of freedom to their children, shaped her development into someone who

⁶⁹ Pitkin, pp.4-5.

⁷⁰ Robert A. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p.89.

⁷¹ Charisse Ma Lebron Spurr, *Blog for America*, <http://blog.deanforamerica.com/archives/001810.html> (accessed February 15, 2005).

embraces diversity among all people.

In her 2002 campaign, Mee Moua learned that mobilization of the Hmong American community and maintenance of the Hmong ethnic identity are key features in her own success. Therefore, she has tried to maintain a balance between her ethnic identity and her individuality. One example of the difficulty of keeping that balance was Mee Moua's support for the Marriage Solemnization Bill. The bill would have allowed traditional Hmong wedding ceremonies by "Mej Koob" (Hmong officials), but the issue was a highly controversial one, not only in the Capitol, but within the Hmong community. Because she was not able to secure passage of the bill, she was heavily criticized by Hmong Americans. She has compared this situation to "walking into a landmine."⁷²

As a leader of a recently enfranchised community, Mee Moua has been asked to represent Hmong Americans. She says, "I've always been a political billboard in the Hmong American community."⁷³ She tries to attract people's attention (not necessarily her constituents) and help them appreciate the importance of voting. She regularly talks with people at supermarkets, shops, and at other places in her district.

Mee Moua's effort to encompass two cultures is also found in her reply to a question about her standing in the Hmong American community: "I am willing to be a cultural ambassador, but I can't be the Legislature's sole connection to the Hmong community." Mee Moua is well aware that some people identify her representation only as a "descriptive representative," and believe that she only works for the Hmong. This dilemma arises especially as Hmong Americans are accused of committing crimes that receive considerable attention in the mainstream media. Therefore, it is sometimes necessary for her to maneuver her public identity to dispel both prejudice and misunderstanding on the grounds that she is a woman, a Hmong, and an Asian American, and instead show the public that her main concern is to work

⁷² Sara Dady, "Senator Mee Moua: Working in the System," *The Opinion*, (St. Paul: William Mitchell College of Law Student Newspaper, September 2002), Volume 2, 1-2.

⁷³ Mee Moua, (Interviewed by the author on March 9, 2005).

for all her constituents. In these cases, there is no racial differentiation in Mee Moua's mind when she presents herself to the public.

Mee Moua's election marked a turning point for the Asian American community, and especially for Hmong Americans. Her victory in the 2002 special election drew considerable media attention. American society has increasingly come to recognize the success of Hmong Americans, not only in politics, but in other areas. Before Mee Moua's victory, the people in her state did not know much about the Hmong people and why they had come to the United States. Mee Moua spoke about this issue during her campaign and could feel the momentum of a new generation of community activists and Hmong Americans, as they were energized by the desire to become politically significant. Other prominent Hmong American leaders were elected to office after Mee Moua's election including Minnesota State Representative Cy Thao and Saint Paul School Board Member Kazoua Kong-Thao. In Minnesota, Hmong American elected officials have come to command closer attention from both the media and the public.

Conclusion

By having a dual identity, Mee Moua has succeeded in the United States while remaining loyal to her native culture. She has done much to give a stronger voice to her native culture, a voice that often is denied to immigrants and Asian immigrants, because of their very minority status. Thus, as a State Senator, it is very important for Mee Moua to remember that she is representing all her constituents, and not just Hmong Americans or minorities. There are many ethnic groups in Mee Moua's district and also many European Americans and others with a variety of cultural backgrounds and histories; therefore, as part of her dual identity, she has to remember the importance of blending ideas from different constituencies and recognize how important it is to do so. In other words, she has to represent the largest groups as well as the smallest groups within her precinct as an individual, "Mee Moua," even if this puts her at times at odds with some groups within the diverse Hmong American community in her district and in Minnesota. Mee Moua was elected to a second full-term in the Minnesota State Senate

From a Refugee Camp to the Minnesota State Senate: A Case Study of a Hmong American Woman's Challenge by Taeko Yoshikawa, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2006, 7:1-23.

on November 8, 2006 with 69% of the vote.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ "Election Results: Minnesota: Minnesota Senate District 67," *Minnesota Public Radio*.
http://minnesota.publicradio.org/collections/special/2006/campaign/results/stsenate_dist.php?district=67 (accessed December 1, 2006).