Chapter 1. Lao Hmong History and Immigration to the United States

Lao Hmong Geography and History

Slightly larger than the state of Utah, Laos (officially known as Lao People’s Democratic Republic) is a land-locked nation in southeast Asia, bordered by China to the north, Myanmar to the northwest, Thailand to the west, Vietnam to the east, and Cambodia to the south (Duffy et al., 2004). The capital city of Vientiane is located on the border with Thailand. The population of Laos is approximately 5.9 million (WHO, 2006c). The most recent census identified 47 distinct ethnic groups (WHO, Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2006). The ethnic Lao comprise 52.5% of the total population and predominate in the lowlands, while ethnic minorities predominate in the highlands. About 9% of the Lao population is Hmong. The average life expectancy at birth in Laos is 55.5 years (United States Central Intelligence Agency, 2006).

The Hmong in the United States are members of a distinct ethno-linguistic group from northern Laos, where 315,000 Hmong still reside. The Hmong originated from Southern China and over time migrated to different parts of Asia in an attempt to resist political control and population pressures of the Han Chinese. Many Hmong fled to mountainous areas of central and southern China, where several million Hmong people still reside. In addition, some Hmong migrated to areas in Southeast Asia, including northern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma (Center for Cross-Cultural Health, 2000; Culhane-Pera, Cha, & Kunstadter, 2004). During the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency recruited the Hmong to fight in the “Secret War in Laos” on the side of the royal Lao government against the Communist Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese (Culhane-Pera et al., 2004).

After Laos fell to the Communist party in 1975, many Hmong were targeted for reprisals and fled to refugee camps in Thailand. Many were later resettled to various countries around the world, including the United States (Center for Cross-Cultural Health, 2000). Although many Hmong immigrated in 1975, others either remained in Thailand with unresolved immigration status, were repatriated to Laos, or eventually relocated to the United States in the late 1990s (Culhane-Pera et al., 2004).

In Laos, the Hmong way of life has been shaped by mountainous living conditions, the practice of slash-and-burn agriculture, animism and ancestral worship, and a patriarchal family and clan system. The impact of war and dislocation, as well as years of oppression, have undoubtedly influenced Hmong society in many ways (Duffy et al., 2004). The persistence of strong cultural traditions despite the isolation of subgroups is testimony to the strength of Hmong ethnic identity.
Immigration and Resettlement to the United States

Since 1980, the Hmong population in the United States has quadrupled (Hmong National Development Inc & Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2004). During 2004–2006, an additional 15,256 Hmong were resettled in the United States. According to the 2000 U.S. Decennial Census, 170,000–186,000 Hmong live in the United States, mostly in California (38%), Minnesota (25%), Wisconsin (20%), and North Carolina (4%) (Culhane-Péra et al., 2004). However, Hmong community leaders believe the Hmong population is 250,000–300,000 (Carroll & Udalova, 2005; Hmong National Development Inc & Hmong Cultural and Resource Center, 2004).³

In 2003, the U.S. government agreed to resettle 15,707 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, a refugee camp in Thailand (California Department of Health Services, 2004; CDC, 2005b). From June 2004 to January 2005, an estimated 9,500 refugees were resettled in 27 U.S. states, with 75% of the refugees going to California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin (Castro, 2005; U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). In contrast to the first groups of Hmong refugees who came from a subsistence, agrarian background, the newer wave of refugees, half of whom are under the age of 14, are more familiar with Western culture and modern technology (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2004).

From February 2005 to July 2006, an estimated 5,800 more Hmong refugees resettled in the United States; only a small number were expected to resettle in 2007 (U.S. Department of State et al., 2005; U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). In contrast to the first groups of Hmong refugees who came from a subsistence, agrarian background, the newer wave of refugees, half of whom are under the age of 14, are more familiar with Western culture and modern technology (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2004).

³ The higher estimate is based on an assessment conducted jointly by Hmong National Development, Inc. in Washington D.C., the Hmong Resource Center at the Hmong Cultural Center in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and Hmong and non-Hmong scholars. The assessment used 2000 Census data but a more inclusive definition of “Hmong.” Specifically, the definition included all those who reported his or her race, ancestry, or language as Hmong. Members of the Hmong community widely believe that the census represents an actual count of only half the true population, and that it is skewed to those who are more acculturated into mainstream U.S. culture in terms of education, English language ability, and other socioeconomic variables.