

Hmong Research—Then and Now: Closing Keynote Speech by Dr. Bruce T. Downing at the Hmong Across Borders Conference, University of Minnesota, October 5, 2013.

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Abstract:

This article consists of the text of a speech delivered by Dr. Bruce T. Downing as the closing keynote speech at the Hmong Across Borders conference at the University of Minnesota in October 2013. The speech discusses how the author became involved in Hmong Studies and how the University of Minnesota came to take on an important role in Hmong Studies research in the early 1980s. The author also discusses his involvement in early Hmong refugee resettlement efforts in the U.S. and how the landscape of Hmong Studies has changed over the past several decades.

Keywords: Hmong refugee resettlement, Hmong Studies

Greetings to you all, old friends and new.

The organizers of this conference have shown me the honor of inviting me to speak to you, the scholars and researchers of today, about the early days of Hmong resettlement in the U.S. (and France and Australia) and how research activities concerning Hmong refugees got their start at the University of Minnesota.

It is fascinating to me to reflect that these two conferences organized by the Hmong Research Consortium--the 2011 conference at the University of Wisconsin and this 2013 conference—are occurring exactly 30 years after the First and Second Hmong Research Conferences, held here at the University of Minnesota in 1981 and 1983. So much has changed, and so much continues, since those years of displacement, distress, new acquaintances, and new beginnings.

My remarks will be limited to my own perspective, as an academic, focusing on how research, scholarly collaboration, and community engagement at this university developed during the crucial and fascinating decade of the 1980s. I will close with a few observations on the present state of Hmong Studies as reflected in the wealth of research reported at this conference.

I. The Impact of Hmong Resettlement in the Twin Cities

The first Hmong refugees arrived in St. Paul in 1976. Many Vietnamese refugees arrived here after the fall of Saigon in spring 1975, and at first the Hmong were not noticed except by those connected with the voluntary agencies (VOLAGS) - in the Twin Cities, Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services, and the International Institute--called upon to sponsor refugee families, enroll children in the schools, etc. At that time, the Twin Cities had only small minority populations, Black and Latino, even fewer Asians, and some recent immigrants. Refugees were a totally new phenomenon. And the Hmong, coming in small numbers that became a flood by 1980, were seen by locals mainly as a problem, their arrival a crisis: how to house Hmong families, find employment, and integrate the children into the schools? How to communicate with them and provide health care? Americans were shocked by their speech, their dress, their evident lack of formal education—in short, their “foreignness.” Few Americans understood who the Hmong were or why they were here; few were prepared to assist them with their adjustment to a new life in the United States--although the welcome here in the Twin Cities and conditions for resettlement seem to have been better than in many other American communities.

That was the American perspective. For these Hmong themselves, of course, there had been the terrible war that stretched from Vietnam into Laos, the years of loss and displacement, perilous escapes into Thailand, months or years in refugee camps, and the flight to an unknown new life in America. You all know the story.

II. The SARS Project

Here in Minnesota, before we began working together, some scholars had engaged with the Hmong community on their own. One was Dr. Joseph Westermeyer, who had done research and was acquainted with the “Meo” (Hmong) in Thailand and Laos. As a psychiatric researcher, he designed a survey administered to 100 individuals, the first 100 Hmong adults to settle in the Twin Cities. Over many years, Westermeyer published numerous articles in the medical literature exploring different aspects of what could be gleaned from that survey and related research: what the mental health issues seemed to be and how they might be

addressed. Professor Tim Dunnigan, in Anthropology, began to become acquainted with members of the Hmong community and learn and write about family structure and community organization. As a linguist, I undertook to learn something about the Hmong language and advise language teachers facing the challenge of helping Hmong adults with their simultaneous challenges of acquiring basic literacy and practical communication skills in English. An ESL grad student (Sharon Dwyer) and I began a series of studies of how Hmong speakers and English speakers communicated “across the language barrier.”

How did collaborative research get started? As it happened, several of us were brought together by a University accountant, Mary Bilek, who had decided to “sponsor” a Hmong family; she could handle it only, she said, if a group of faculty and staff agreed to back her up if the challenge proved too great. We not only agreed to do that but decided to jointly teach a seminar (sponsored by the “Office of Special Learning Opportunities”) in which students from across the University could be introduced to community research through working in the Hmong community. One student organized a first Hmong gardening project in St Paul; a linguistics student came up with the idea of teaching basic spoken English and literacy through arithmetic lessons in English (“ $2 + 2 = 4$ ” has the same syntax as “Mai and Chang are my friends”). That was in the spring of 1980.

That summer we designed the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies (SARS) Project within the University’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA). CURA had a strong record of community engagement and support of ethnic minorities. From the beginning, the focus was on the Hmong community. (Centers of research on Vietnamese refugees existed already elsewhere.) I took on the role of coordinator and selected one of our seminar students, Doug Olney, as graduate assistant. Our initial aim was simply to coordinate and support the refugee-related research, outreach and teaching of a small group of affiliated faculty and secondarily to connect with other scholars engaging with Hmong communities here and abroad.

Within the first few years we undertook a series of tasks. We began to publish a (mostly) quarterly *SARS Newsletter*, distributed free of charge to everyone who asked for it or whose address we had collected. (The Newsletter was composed

at first from a keyboard hard-wired to the single room-sized computer in the West Bank campus computer center, and distributed on paper by the Post Office.) This SARS newsletter, later called the *Refugee Studies Newsletter*, proved a treasured resource for academics and community workers engaged with Hmong communities everywhere from Orange County to Rhode Island.

Doug Olney began to collect writings of all sorts, including newspaper clippings, concerning the Hmong in SE Asia and in the new diaspora, compiling the references into a short bibliography distributed in 1981. The second edition, published in 1983 as the first of the SARS Occasional Papers, seems to have been the first separately published Hmong bibliography. Subsequent updates and several specialized bibliographies were contributed by other institutions, and eventually superseded by Mark Pfeifer's extraordinary series of bibliographies in print and online at the Hmong Studies Internet Resource Center (<http://www.hmongnet.org>).

In the late summer of 1981, I was able to travel to Northern Europe with the aim of learning how Southeast Asian refugees were being received in those countries. In France I met Dr. Yang Dao, at his home outside Paris, as well as Professor Jacques Lemoine. A phone call back to my Dean at the U of M brought an invitation for Yang Dao to come and speak at the University. This connection led to us later obtaining an immigration visa (through the University) that enabled Yang Dao, with his family, to become a permanent resident (and citizen) of the U.S. and a member of our research group.

Also in that first year, we reached out through the *SARS Newsletter* to those who had something to contribute to a conference on Hmong research. Papers from this first-ever "Hmong Studies Conference," held on October 2-3, 1981, were published by CURA as *The Hmong in the West* (Downing & Olney, eds., 1982). Dr. Yang Dao's talk, delivered in French and Hmong, as I recall, along with two others, were the only contributions by researchers who were Hmong. Some conference reports were quite preliminary. But the conference brought together what was being learned about the Hmong, their culture and history, and their experiences in resettlement and became, again, a valuable resource. And that conference helped to create a national and international Hmong research network.

The Second Hmong Research Conference, held two years later in November 1983, attracted more sophisticated and mature research. A grant from NEH enabled participation by scholars such as Lemoine, Dr. Nicholas Tapp, and Dr. Gary Yia Lee from Australia. Gary Lee in particular made an important contribution through his critique of some of the misconceptions of non-Hmong researchers who had too little background knowledge of the history and culture of the Hmong people. During this time the linguist William Smalley had joined the faculty of Bethel College (now Bethel University) outside St. Paul and become an affiliate of SARS. As you know, Professor Smalley was a co-creator of the Hmong Romanized Popular Alphabet, along with Father Bertrais and J. Linwood Barney (another linguist, who incidentally was a graduate of the University of Minnesota). Dr. Smalley also contributed importantly to the conference. The proceedings were published, by CURA jointly with the Center for Migration Studies of New York, as *The Hmong in Transition* (Hendricks, Downing, & Deinard, 1998).

Meanwhile Tim Dunnigan, Bill Smalley, and I received NEH support for a collaborative study on aspects of Hmong culture in transition. While this research was never joined into a book, elements of it have been published separately in various journals. Smalley, with Chia Koua Yang and Gnia Yee Yang, wrote *The Life of Shong Lue Yang: Hmong "Mother of Writing,"* published by SARS in 1990, simultaneously with the publication of their *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (Smalley, Yang, & Yang, 1990). Another Twin Cities scholar, Charles Johnson, published his *Dab Neeg Hmoob: Myths, Legends and Folktales from the Hmong of Laos* (Johnson, 1983). SARS also published *I Am a Shaman: A Hmong Life Story with Ethnographic Commentary*, by Dwight Conquergood and Paja Thao, in the Occasional Papers series in 1989.

III. The Hmong Resettlement Study

Publication of *The Hmong in Transition* was delayed and other research was set aside for a time when the Office of Refugee Resettlement offered funding for what became The Hmong Resettlement Study. Three organizations that had planned to bid for the contract instead agreed to collaborate. The contract was awarded to Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon (which was already

engaged in a large-scale study of English language acquisition by Hmong adults), the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (sponsor of SARS), and Lao Family Community of Santa Ana. (Most of you are familiar with the publications that came out of this study.) The main thrust of the research was to discover how Hmong communities in various parts of the U.S. were doing and what could be done to improve their economic and social status. To this end a series of community studies were conducted, beginning with a pilot study in the Twin Cities, in addition to a separate assessment of Hmong entrepreneurial activities.

A team consisting of Hmong and non-Hmong researchers spent 10 days or more in each identified community, talking with Hmong and non-Hmong community leaders and individuals to learn about employment, housing, and societal integration.

The most memorable experience I had in all my contacts with the Hmong people was the two weeks I spent doing one of these visits in Fort Smith, Arkansas, with co-researcher John Finck from Rhode Island, Shur Vang Vangyi (representing Lao Family Community), and two local Hmong (Jer Thao and Chang Xiong), who served as facilitators.





We had an initial community meeting to which all members of the Hmong community were invited. The non-Hmong man in the foreground, Tom Ashworth, is a native of Fort Smith whom some of these Hmong met when they had first landed in Orange County, California. He had sung the praises of Arkansas and offered to find jobs for some if they wanted to follow him when he moved from California back to Fort Smith. This community of Hmong were eager to escape welfare and find decent employment or, they hoped, opportunities to start businesses and return to farming.

After our initial meeting, of course, we had to have a Hmong dinner together. Later, we interviewed several members of the community separately, both Hmong and non-Hmong, and we held a meeting with a few of the community. (The group in the picture includes my research partner, John Finck). There we listened to their comments about the problems they faced and their plans and hopes.



Both men and women had come to Fort Smith eager to work, but we quickly learned that overt discrimination had kept many of them from actually finding employment. A typical job was working in the chicken processing plant, often on the night shift, freezing their fingers as they deboned frozen fowl. Clearly the community as a whole wasn't doing well.

I try not to get emotionally involved with research subjects, but after an interpreted interview with one of the older Hmong men, I went back to my motel room, sat on the end of my bed, and penned a kind of poem as a record of what he and others had told me, about their reception in America and the obstacles they faced in seeking employment (see Appendix). I think I added a couple of stanzas later; this individual may not have personally rescued American pilots, but for the most part the poem represents what I was told about the life experience of this courageous man.





Several members of the community had collectively purchased some rural land. Their plan was to clear the land and begin farming. But the land had been sold to them at an excessive price, and the soil was very poor. When we visited this property, shown in the photos, men were cutting the trees and clearing the ground,

using hand tools, and burning stumps. They were also engaged in loosening soil with the hope of growing rice. But this farming operation wasn't going well either. They bought some cattle, but someone opened the gate and let the animals out, and, when asked, none of the neighbors had seen the escaped animals. After they started a garden, people apparently came in overnight and dragged a chain between two tractors to destroy it. So much for integration into the community.

We were invited to visit the Asia Food Market, which they had jointly purchased, but it wasn't doing very well; its main use was for community meetings in the back room. They just couldn't make any money with it. The second photo shows some of our hosts inside the store.





One instance where there was recognition of the Hmong by the Fort Smith community happened while we were in town. Some residents had found out that Hmong women produced and were selling *pa ndau*. An exhibit was mounted at the Old Fort Museum, which we were able to visit. This brought about their first media attention.



In one photo *pa ndau* is displayed in the case; the woman on the right had done some exceptionally beautiful work. The two men in the photo were our two local liaisons.

Community leaders told us of their desire to collectively start a business. They had created a plan for raising free-range chickens, but were not able to get together the needed start-up funds.

Altogether, they had found little success through their move to Fort Smith. These last pictures were taken at our final gathering, where the leaders gave voice to their hope that our visit would lead to some help for their situation. At our closing meeting they appealed to John Finck and me: could we go back to Washington and explain their situation. We told them we would report what we had seen, but could of course promise nothing.



Obviously not all encounters with the local community were as bad as depicted in my little poem, but their situation was distressing nevertheless. These Hmong had left California with a strong desire to get off welfare, but for most their efforts toward self-sufficiency had been fruitless. While they had rejected

dependency on the U.S. government, they still needed a little more help somewhere along the line. They perhaps had made a mistake in choosing to move to Fort Smith; Tom Ashworth couldn't get them all jobs--nor had he promised to.

Fort Smith appeared to be a very closed, self-sufficient community, and the natives themselves were going through hard times. Residents there felt that they were being invaded by job-seekers from the north, such as laid-off auto workers from Detroit, and thus many were not inclined to welcome these other job-seekers, the foreigners from Southeast Asia.

HOWEVER—Washington bureaucrats actually do read and act on research sometimes. The main action to come out of the Hmong Resettlement Study (Literacy & Language Program, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, April 1985)—strongly influenced by what we reported from Fort Smith (Downing, October 1984)—was ORR's Highland Lao Initiative, under which the feds identified desirable locales for resettlement and subsidized Hmong in places like Fort Smith, where life was hard, to move there. Many of the Fort Smith Hmong were able to make the move to Atlanta, Georgia, with help from ORR. You probably know that there were also Hmong from the Twin Cities who relocated to places like North Carolina, where jobs were apparently plentiful, with similar government assistance and with similar success.

When I had the opportunity to visit Atlanta a few years later, I found many of the families I had met in Fort Smith living in a suburban community near Stone Mountain, and I was invited out for a visit. Most families had purchased handsome suburban homes, with enough land to do a little farming. Many had well-paid employment, often with healthcare coverage and even educational benefits.



The house that I visited and a group of men I had previously met in Fort Smith are shown in the photos.





The next pictures were taken in the back of this house, where the owner had enough land to be able to raise chickens and other fowl and grow crops. He had a garden that no one was tearing up. He was very proud of his grain crop. There was an impressive field of rice. After this visit, my hosts proudly showed me the church building they owned; the young people there had formed a choir that toured by bus (one the congregation had bought) to perform in other churches around the country.



It appeared that just about everything these Hmong were unable to do in Fort Smith, they were now able to do--after a little government help inspired by the survey that we had done--in the Atlanta area.



This handsome couple (photographed back in Fort Smith), I was told, had moved up north, with professional employment—though I can't recall the details of their success.

IV. Later Developments

I will now just mention a few milestones in the later trajectory of Hmong Studies at this university. In 1975 (1985?) another funding opportunity came along. NIMH (the National Institute of Mental Health), through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, organized an initiative to address mental health issues among refugees in the most highly impacted states, and part of the plan was to fund one research center to support this initiative, the "Refugee Mental Health Technical Assistance Center."

Apparently because we had developed a reputation for collaborative research, and particularly because of Dr. Joseph Westermeyer's active involvement in mental health research in the Hmong community, the University of Minnesota received the three-year contract to provide centralized support for this national refugee mental health initiative. Psychologists and psychiatrists from across the country, along with researchers in public health, and even anthropology and linguistics, became part of this project. This new activity resulted, by the end of the decade, in a series of conferences and many research publications.

I myself became involved in this new center, but my role, as a linguist, was to organize a subproject to address the problems of communication between providers of mental health services and their patients who did not speak English. That is how I

got interested in the whole question of providing competent, professional interpreting in mental health and other fields, which has been the focus of my own interests since then.

From 1985 Glenn Hendricks took over as director of SARS. He had been conducting research on Hmong youth and education. Graduate assistant John Marsden gave SARS a new direction, compiling a Cambodian bibliography and conducting his own research in the Cambodian refugee community. Later Ruth Hammond, a professional writer and editor, joined the staff, continuing publication of the *SARS Newsletter* and editing other publications.

Around 1990 SARS was reorganized as the Refugee Studies Program under Professor Dan Detzner, from Family Social Science and Education, whose research areas include refugee families, education, and elders. And finally, after having been supported by CURA longer than any other of its “short-term” projects, the Refugee Studies Center was closed.

Fortunately, research and collaboration have continued in other venues. The University’s Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) had started life many years earlier as a project looking at Southern and Eastern European immigrants in Northern Minnesota, and for a long time it maintained a focus on 19th Century immigration. But gradually its mission was expanded to “migration, race, and ethnicity in the U.S. and the world” (from the IHRC mission statement (www.ihrc.umn.edu)), thus embracing refugee studies and Hmong studies. IHRC acquired the research collection from SARS and the Refugee Studies Center (which had been put into boxes), cataloguing it in the Center’s archives (now one of the University Library’s special collections).

During the same period, Asian-American scholars were gradually being added to the University’s faculty in various departments, including, eventually, Hmong faculty, leading to the establishment of an Asian-American Studies Program, now a partner with the Southeast Asian program at the University of Wisconsin in the collaboration that is the sponsor of this conference. The make-up and interests of the University’s Asian American Studies faculty have, I believe, contributed to the

broadening of Asian-American Studies nationally to give Southeast Asian-American and South Asian-American studies their proper place.

V. The Evolution of Hmong Research

From the beginning, SARS was broadly interdisciplinary. Its research and conferences sought to place “refugee flows” and “resettlement” in the broader historical context of Hmong culture and migration and cultural contact. Researchers engaged with the community through both outreach and research. These emphases have continued in more recent activities at the University of Minnesota---and elsewhere, as attested by the presentations at this conference.

A major factor in keeping Hmong Studies vital in recent years, I think, has been Mark Pfeifer’s contributions through the Hmong Studies Center and the *Hmong Studies Journal*. His continuously updated annotated bibliographies have brought the SARS Hmong bibliographies into the 21st Century in remarkable fashion.

Despite recent concern with Wat Tham Krabok and the final wave of mass resettlement in the U.S., I see a major transformation in the field of Hmong Studies, which is now more concerned with contemporary Hmong culture, economy, health and so on in every country where the Hmong now live. Interest in the phenomenon of “secondary migration” in the U.S. is now placed in a broader context by studies of internal migration in Thailand and China. Refugee movements and refugee status are clearly seen now as just an important phase in a long history of migration, cultural evolution, and diaspora.

VI. Final remarks on the conference Hmong Across Borders

I will close my remarks with just a few words on my impressions of current work in Critical Hmong Studies exhibited in the excellent papers and lively discussions at this conference.

The disciplinary range of research presented over the past two days is impressive, from the humanities areas of gender studies, literature, and the arts (including two studies of *pa ndau*), to the social sciences (history, geography, economics, demographics, and politics) to the medical arts, health practices and epidemiology. I am impressed by the participation here of so many who have done

their work in China or in Laos, or who write about diasporic communities in Belize and elsewhere.

Earlier conferences included more work on the Hmong language per se (such as the important work on the Hmong-Mien family of languages of my colleague Dr. Martha Ratliff and others). But certainly Hmong writing, literacy, and literature as well as Hmong media, other genres, and arts are well represented here. In the 1980s most research addressed the urgent need to solve problems of relocation: how to fit large Hmong families into small public housing units, how to communicate, how to provide employment, how to provide health care. While there is important research here on the conflict that created refugees and their struggles, **Hmong Refugee Studies** has clearly been merged into the much broader field of **Hmong Studies**.

I am delighted to see the attention to oral history research and individual histories (the lives of Jerry Daniels and Father Bertrais) and the critiques of other writings such as *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman, 1997) and *The Late Homecomer* (Yang, 2008). As my colleague Tim Dunnigan remarked to me just last week, there are so many memories still to be captured of the historic move of Hmong Across Borders. You are the people who will do this.

I congratulate you all on your work and on this 30th anniversary conference, and I thank the organizers for inviting me to participate.

Appendix

Dialogue with America (For Z. D. T.)

*I am Hmong.
My people lived free in the mountains of Laos.
In America I asked for a job.
I heard you say:
“Hey, here’s another of them Vi-et-man-ese.”*

*I was a soldier.
The American government supplied our “Secret Army.”
I rescued American pilots downed in the jungle.
I was told:
“It’s our policy to hire U.S. citizens.”*

*I was a blacksmith.
In my forge I shaped knives, hoes, and shovels.
I built the forge and the bellows myself.
You said to me:
“We only need people with experience.”*

*I was a farmer.
We grew rice and raised pigs, cows, and chickens.
“Can you help us get land to grow food on?”
You answered:
“The welfare office is in charge of you people.”*

*I’m forty-two years old.
Since age twelve I’ve been farmer, blacksmith and soldier.
My labor supported my family.
You told me:
“We want young people, able to work.”*

*I lost my infant daughter.
Communists poisoned the salt for our food.
Her bones turned to gelatin, and she died.
I overheard you:
“They just came here for the hand-outs, you know.”*

*I am Hmong.
I have skilled hands and I know what hard work is.
I can learn any job you can show me.
You laughed:
“Hire you? You can’t even speak English.”*

B. Downing
Fort Smith, Arkansas
March 21, 1983

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