

## **Hmong Survivors: Second Wave Hmong Parents' Identity**

by

**Mao S Lee**

**Hmong Studies Journal**

**Special Issue with Papers from the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Hmong Studies Consortium, St. Catherine University, October 24-26, 2019**

**Volume 21: 1-29**

### **Abstract**

About 15,000 Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabot (WTK), Thailand resettled in the U.S. in the 2000's. Since their resettlement, these families have lived in America for fifteen years. Besides knowing that they are the most recent group of Hmong refugees, it is unknown how Hmong parents of this cohort perceive themselves. This ethnographic study aims at finding the answer to this question by interviewing nine Hmong parents from the second wave. Results reveal that these parents' perceptions of their identity are based on their socio-historical experiences. Their lived experiences across multiple countries, namely Laos, Thailand, and the U.S. play a vital role in their identity development. Aside from their refugee narratives, group comparison also inevitably plays a role in how they identify themselves. Subsequently, these parents do not want a nationality suffix, such as American or Thai, attached to their identity. Rather, these parents see themselves as Hmong Survivors, an identity that both represents their lack of a nation-state and their refugee background.

**Keywords:** Hmong, identity, immigration

### **Introduction**

Political turmoil across the globe creates millions of refugees around the world. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported a significant increase of refugees from 59.5 million to 65.3 million from 2014 to 2015. Refugees go through life

threatening events in exile. They suffer profoundly from events such as rape, torture, attacks, and separation from family (Daniel & Knudsen, 1995; Malkki, 1995). Some even witness the death of their loved one. Nicholson (1997) reports that during an escape, many refugees suffer from starvation, illness, and other physical injuries. With all of these inhumane experiences, Malkki (1995) claims that “the word ‘refugee’ has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance” (p. 513). As refugees flee from their home country in search of peace and safety, some have and continue to seek asylum in the United States. The Hmong people, too, sought asylum in the U.S. after the U.S. lost in the Secret War.

The Secret War was the mechanism that created Hmong refugees. During the Vietnam War, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) recruited Hmong men and boys to fight for them because of their expertise in geography of Laos (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Hones, 1999; Vang & Flores, 1999; Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, & Cleveland, 2005). When the U.S. lost the war, the communist Vietnamese soldiers started to occupy Laos and suspected the Hmong of being spies for the U.S. and started to persecute Hmong people. This catastrophe forced thousands of Hmong to flee Laos and seek refuge in Thailand, where most went to Ban Vinai Refugee Camp. Ban Vinai was the largest refugee camp in Thailand in the 1970s. It momentarily hosted refugees who fled Laos and Vietnam during that time. It was closed in 1992 after the U.S. provided a permanent resettlement plan for the majority of these refugees.

### **The Two Waves of Hmong Refugees in the U.S.**

According to my knowledge, no literature has documented the different waves of Hmong refugees that resettled in the U.S. But, it is clear that there are two separate waves of Hmong refugees. The main distinctions between the two waves are the resettlement time and location of

where these refugees were registered for resettlement plans. By the time Ban Vinai was closed, the vast majority of Hmong refugees had already resettled in the U.S. However, there remained some who did not come to the U.S. at that time. These remnants were then the last group that resettled in the U.S. in the 2000's (Grigoleit, 2006; Ngo, Bigelow, & Walhstrom, 2007). While these two waves share the common label of Hmong refugees, their characteristics differ in both salient and subtle ways.

### **The First Wave of Hmong Refugees**

The resettlement time of the first wave of Hmong refugees spanned over a lengthy time period. According to the 2000 US Census Bureau, nearly 170,000 Hmong refugees resettled in the U.S. from 1970s to 1990s. This continuous twenty-years of resettlement is what I call the first wave of Hmong refugees. This first wave was documented in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, which was recognized as an official refugee camp. Refugees in an official refugee camp are protected and provided with resources, although limited, such as healthcare and food (Milton et al., 2017). Because the first wave resettled earlier, many Hmong communities in the U.S. were established by Hmong refugees of the first wave.

### **The Second Wave of Hmong Refugees**

There are multiple characteristics that distinguish the second wave of Hmong refugees from the first wave. When Ban Vinai was closed in 1992, those who did not want to come to the U.S. sought shelter elsewhere in Thailand. With permission of the monks at Wat Tham Krabot (WTK), a Buddhist temple in Saraburi province, Hmong refugees moved to WTK. Thus, the vast majority of Hmong refugees in WTK are remnants and children of remnants of the first wave. These remnants continued to raise their families in Thailand. WTK is not a refugee camp so these families were responsible for finding resources to meet their basic needs for survival.

The number of Hmong refugees in WTK grew significantly within a couple of decades. In 2003, it was estimated that 15,000 Hmong people resided in WTK and most were children (Hang, Anderson, Walker, Thao, Chang, & Hestness, 2004). Unlike the first wave that was registered in an official refugee camp during the process of coming to the U.S., this second wave was not registered at an official refugee camp. These second wave Hmong refugees resettled in the U.S. in the 2000's. Compared to the first wave, the second wave was comprised of significantly less people and it took just a few years to resettle this group.

Although it is clear that there are two waves of Hmong refugees, it is unknown whether refugees of these different waves perceive themselves to be the same. Given that the second wave is more recent and very little research has focused on them, this study focuses on the parent cohort of the second wave. The goal of this study is to examine how parents of the second wave construct their identity as they adapt to their new home in the U.S. It has been one and a half decades since these parents resettled in America and they have raised a generation of children in the U.S. Besides their status as parents and recent Hmong refugees, their own perceptions of themselves have yet to be unveiled. As such, this study aims to examine how these parents perceive themselves and what lived experiences they draw on when talking about their identity.

### **Refugees and Identity**

There are multiple factors that contribute to a refugee's identity construction. For instance, age at the time of resettlement impacts a person's identity development in the new country (Rumbaut, 2004). Researchers also found that refugees are more likely to identify with a traditional identity (Phan, Torress Rivera, & Roberts-Wilbur, 2005). They take effort in preserving their cultural traditions because they have lost significant aspects of their culture, including language, ethnic identity, and traditional practices. Besides refugee's tendency to

preserve their traditional identity, the resources they have access to also impact their perceptions of who they are. Socioeconomic status influences how refugees perceive themselves. For instance, recent refugee women from Sudan who have limited English proficiency construct their identities through sharing their stories about their lived experiences and struggles with monetary resources after resettling in the U.S. (Warriner, 2004).

Furthermore, the fact that Hmong do not have a country of their own also play a role in how Hmong refugees see themselves in the new country. Hein (2006) studied refugees and noted that although Hmong refugees share some common experiences with other ethnic refugees, Hmong have a different view of themselves because of their stateless circumstance. He states:

The Hmong's status as an ethnic minority lacking a nation-state of their own fostered a distinctive worldview based on the need for survival in an adversarial environment and a consequent need for self-reliance. As a result, their ethnic boundary strongly emphasizes differences between members and nonmembers. (p. 75)

The lack of a nation-state could also impact how Hmong parents of the second wave construct their identity, depending on the level of connectedness to their new communities in the U.S. Grigoleit (2006) has found that discrimination between the first and second waves exist within the Hmong communities in the U.S. Those from the second wave thought that the first wave had become too Americanized and lacked pride in the Hmong culture. The first wave, on the other hand, perceived the second wave to be needy. This shows that Hmong in the U.S. have different conceptions of their identity and the identity of other Hmong people who resettled in the U.S. at a different time.

Positioning and comparison are a part of identity construction (Hall, 1990). For instance, Nguyen and Brown (2010) examined how adolescents distinguish themselves from others by

ascribing meaning to their language and dressing style. They found that Hmong adolescents construct their identity through comparing themselves with other Hmong students who are deemed different from themselves. The categories that Hmong American adolescents use as ways to compare and thus distinguish themselves from other peers include how Americanized one is and one's ability to use the Hmong language. Positioning informs the current study because Hmong parents of the second wave have lived in multiple places and countries. They are likely to draw on multiple sources when talking about their identity formation.

## **Methodology**

### **Demographics**

The goal of this study was to use an emic perspective to examine how second wave Hmong parents construct their identity. This study took place in a Midwestern state and all names and places are pseudonyms. I conducted an ethnographic study and used purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants. I interviewed a total of nine parents. Seven of them are mothers and two are fathers. All parents are refugees from WTK who arrived in the U.S. starting in 2004. These parents' ages ranged from 37 to 80 years old. The average age was 51.1 and the median age was 40. Five parents worked full-time at the time of the interview and their average salary was \$22,659.60. The other four parents did not work and received Social Security Income (SSI).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I utilized a phenomenological interview method (Seidman, 2006) to collect data and allowed the themes to emerge from the interview transcripts. Each interview lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. The time lapse between interviews with the same informant was between one and three weeks. A couple of these second wave Hmong parents were available to be interviewed

only once, so I combined interview questions from both the first and second interviews to collect as much data from them as possible. Interviews with these informants lasted longer than parents who were available for subsequent interviews. Nearly all interviews were conducted at these parents' houses. However, a third interview with a parent was a naturalistic interview that took place at her relative's house while she attended a ritual ceremony.

Besides their native language, most of these second wave Hmong parents had some proficiencies in Thai and English. Thus, they often switched between three languages: Hmong, Thai, and English. To allow themes to emerge on their own and to acknowledge the significance of these parents' word choices, I transcribed all interviews in the original languages spoken. I conducted data analysis of the transcripts in the native languages to search for themes that may point to their identities and cultural practices. I used open coding to analyze data and allowed themes to emerge.

## **Research Findings**

Parents in this study construed their identity based on their lived experiences and group comparisons. They expressed a desire to have a distinctive identity compared to other groups of Hmong people, because of their survival experiences across Laos, Thailand, and the U.S. Although they had lived in multiple countries, these parents were strongly opposed to the idea of attaching a nationality suffix to their Hmong identity. Instead of identifying themselves as Hmong American, American, or Hmong Thai, they described themselves as recent arrivers, newcomers, Hmong from the camp, refugees, Hmong refugees, stateless people, Hmong survivors, and war survivors. What these pronouns have in common is vulnerability. They all carry actions of surviving a dangerous situation and transitioning to something new and unfamiliar.

Thus, the identity that these second wave Hmong parents have construed for themselves is as being Hmong Survivors. This survival identity suggests that they are a vulnerable group of people who have survived tragedies for a prolonged time. Their survival identity stems from their experiences and struggles across different countries since childhood. Their experiences of being highly mobile and severely suppressed by political matters also influenced how they viewed themselves. Below, I discuss four themes that emerged from the data that formed the basis for these parents' identity as Hmong Survivors.

### **Refugee Experience Influences Identity Construction**

When I asked parents in this study about their experiences of coming to the U.S., they talked extensively about their refugee experiences. Eight out of the nine parents in this study shared about the life-threatening events they went through as refugees. These events include traumatic experiences of fleeing across the Laos and Thailand border and moving between refugee camps. They shared that during the Vietnam War, they and their families were scattered at the Laos and northern Thailand border. They were not welcomed in neither country. They were constantly forced to flee as soon as they arrived at a place. For instance, Mai recalled what she and her family went through at the border:

“We couldn't farm. We couldn't build a house because we had no stable place to live... We slept 2 to 3 nights on this side, then the Thais came to chase us out. So, we ran to the other side... and spent 1 to 2 nights there, and would make a hut using banana leaves. Then, the Laotians<sup>1</sup> would come hunt us down, too... The Vietnamese came back to shoot [us], too, so we ran back to Thailand... At that time, [we] just hid in the forest, hid

---

<sup>1</sup> These second wave Hmong parents refer to the Pathet Lao as Laotian and the Red Laotian.

at the Hmong Thais' rice fields with no safety, no safe place to live... So it was always like this.”

Mai's story illustrates that there was no permanent and safe shelter during exile. She and her family had to live in fear without knowing when the enemies would arrive.

In addition to moving between the two countries, some of these parents had to flee refugee camps due to the uncertainties that lied ahead of them. Meng and his family are an example of those who kept moving to search for safety. Meng was a child at the time of the Vietnam War. He recalled the struggles he and his family encountered while living in refugee camps:

“We stayed in Ban Vinai until it was closed. Then, all of us moved. There were some [people] that moved to America. And there were some that...moved to the Hmong Thai [region in northern Thailand]. And for us, we moved to the Hmong Thai [region]. We stayed there, [and] we were very poor, [because] we did not have any [legal] documents.”

When Ban Vinai was closing, Meng's parents did not know whom to trust. So, in the midst of uncertainty, his parents decided to take their family to northern Thailand. They soon learned that outside of the refugee camp they would struggle even more, because they were considered illegal immigrants. After spending a couple of years in northern Thailand, Meng's family moved to WTK because they did not have access to a stable place to live or a reliable land to farm. As a child, Meng's life was affected by his parents' decisions. Thus, he could not come to the U.S. earlier.

Furthermore, there was variation in terms of planning a flight as revealed by these parents. While some parents disclosed limited to no planning for an escape between countries or refugee camps, PaZoua shared explicitly about how her family prepared to leave a camp. PaZoua

credited her husband for his bravery in taking the initiative and secretly taking his family out of a refugee camp. She shared what was in her husband's mind at that time:

“Oh [my husband] thought, “My parents don't want to go back to Laos. And, in the refugee camp, we are being controlled by authorities all the time. And everything is so difficult for us. There's no freedom, not even for a single day. We can't do anything at all. Our hearts are very helpless. [We are] poor. No money to spend. It's so hard.”

She continued sharing what her husband said to her:

“[I] also heard that there were a lot of people who escaped [from refugee camps] and went to [WTK] and they are so free [there]. [I heard people said], “[WTK] frees you! You can go in and out and no one will monitor you...no one bothers you!”

After telling me about her conversation with her husband that took place over two decades ago, she exclaimed, “So, [my husband] told us that he wanted to go take a look at [WTK] and see what it was like. And he did!”

After visiting WTK, her husband went back to the refugee camp and prepared PaZoua and the other family members for a life-changing flight. PaZoua recalled the frightening process of how her family managed to escape from the refugee camp, “There was no way we could leave using the main entrance [of the refugee camp]. We sneaked out through the barbwire fence. And, if [any authorities] saw us, they'd catch us.” She excitedly shared how she and her family packed their household items and slid each bag under the barbwire by using her hands to illustrate their actions:

“We secretly sent our stuff first, like, we bagged our stuff and slid them under the barbwire fence, yeah. Then, we crawled under the barbwire fence to the other side. Then, we paid some Thai people to deliver our stuff to [WTK]... [Then], there were some

Hmong people...who always went back and forth [between the refugee camp and WTK] and they knew the roads real well, they came to lead us and so we left!"

Having a young and healthy man in PaZoua's family benefited them in terms of seeking resources and planning to move the family from a place they no longer felt safe at. When her husband traveled to WTK, her father-in-law stayed behind with the family. Having an elderly male figure in the family provided them assurance that the family would be protected because men are associated with both physical and psychological strengths, especially during crisis.

PaZoua's family's plan included actively seeking information about the new place and hiring experts to lead their way. However, that is not to say that they fled without fear of consequences. They were afraid of the authorities and that was why her husband traveled alone to survey WTK. Their fear of getting caught also led them to escape at night. As PaZoua put it, her husband "had already visited WTK and had already paved a path" for her family. Thus, they were more aware of what approach would be less risky.

On the contrary, Mai's family was not as lucky as PaZoua's family. She and her family fled Laos after Ban Vinai was closed. But, when they arrived in Thailand, they were misinformed by some Thai men that the refugee camp was still open. This encounter was a scam that Mai and her family experienced, and they were eventually captured by the Thai men they initially trusted. She lowered her voice and spoke slowly about her experience:

"When my family and I arrived in Thailand, we hired some Thai men to take us to the refugee camp. They said they would take us and so we paid them money. It turned out they were just lying to us. They did not take us [to the refugee camp]... They took our money and locked us up in a pigsty. We stayed in the muddy pigsty for days. At the end, they just let us go because we really had no more money for them."

Although Mai could not remember how old she was when this incident happened, she remembered clearly how they were taken to the muddy pigsty. She was a child at that time, but this traumatic experience and the associated fear and emotions continues to disturb her.

The majority of these parents went through unimaginably harsh times as children, and even in adulthood they continued to face uncertainties. Given the severity of each tragedy and the magnitude of each instance, these parents are especially vulnerable. Their experiences do not make them unique but rather, it shows that they are survivors. Their survival stems from what they have known and learned for as long as they have been alive. And when looking at identity, this aspect of their personal strengths cannot be neglected because it plays such a vital role in who they are.

### **Experiences of Living in WTK Influences Identity Construction**

Participants in this study collectively shared that they felt protected and safer at WTK, which was one of the main reasons they moved there. WTK is a Buddhist temple that provides rehabilitation for drug and alcohol addicts, and some Hmong families used that as an excuse to gain admission to the camp. Toua's family, for instance, moved to WTK for both benefits. Toua became addicted to opium after using opium as an anesthetic for injuries on his entire right leg. In my interview with Toua, he disclosed that he went to WTK for drug rehabilitation. He shared how he had become addicted to opium: "I stepped on a bomb<sup>2</sup> during the Vietnam War in 1964." As he was speaking, he rolled up his right pant and showed me the scars. The damages and scars on his right leg—starting from his foot all the way up to his upper thigh—have left his leg with less flesh attached to the bones, and his bones nearly visible to my eyes. He continued,

---

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, Toua did not step on an actual bomb but it was likely a hand grenade.

No surgery was done on me and so there are still pieces of those parts inside my leg [today]. At that time, there was no medicine and [my leg] hurt so badly. So, I used opium to help ease the pain.”

By the time Toua’s leg was better, he was already an opium addict. Although Toua and his family had lived in Ban Vinai, he did not pass the intensive drug screening process and so his family could not come to the U.S. with the first wave of Hmong refugees.

In addition, Dee who is Toua’s wife, commented that they had registered at WTK using the drug rehabilitation as their reason for admission. However, they were actually seeking to move there permanently. Dee talked about why her family went to WTK:

“We heard that there were a lot of people who were opium addicts and they went to [WTK] to stop using opium. So, we went there, too... We went there and registered our names so we could live in the camp, too.”

Similar to other parents in this study, Dee perceived WTK to be a safer place for her family, and at the same time, Toua could take advantage of the drug rehabilitation program. So, both of these factors motivated her family to move there.

Furthermore, survival outside of an official refugee camp requires that Hmong refugees help each other. This included sharing information about safe shelter and monetary resources. Mai was among the parents who shared about their journey of moving to WTK successfully because of the help of other refugee families. She recalled:

“When your grandparents went to [WTK], we also went with them, too... That was the end of the world for us [because] we didn’t have anywhere to go. And it just happened that your grandparents rented a huge huge truck so my mother asked them to help us pay for the [ride] so that we could escape with them...because we were really really poor.”

Mai and her family moved to northern Thailand after they were released from the Thai men who held them captured at the pigsty. There, she and her family met other Hmong refugee families, and eventually as a group, they decided to move to WTK. Mai's recollection of her family's journey to WTK reveals that while most refugees' experiences are harsh, they also help each other to survive. Despite doubt about the unknown future and fear of possible persecution at any minute, Mai's family and other Hmong refugees acknowledged that survival was more important than any assets they possessed.

Additionally, what stands out about Mai's stories is how her family was reconnected with their relatives during exile. Although she was the only one who shared about reuniting with kin, this social tie played a significant role in her survival story. Mai disclosed that fear of persecution eventually grouped Hmong refugees together although they did not know each other. The repeated activities of racing across the border between the two neighboring countries led them to become familiar with one another and later to look after each other. Subsequently, they learned about each other's patrilineage and eventually realized they were related. Mai further shared that her family and my grandparents' family were strangers who met at the Laos and Thailand border while trying to escape the war: "[We] didn't know each other at all, but we learned about each other's families and ancestors when we were at the border... [Before that], we were just strangers to each other!"

Although these parents reported feeling safer at WTK, it is important to note here once again that WTK was not an official refugee camp. So, food and monetary resources were a scarcity. Refugees were no longer receiving weekly subsidized meals and were fully responsible for meeting their own basic needs for survival. For instance, Meng explained the struggle at WTK:

“Yea, so when we lived in WTK we were poor *way* more compared to when we were in Ban Vinai... When we were in Ban Vinai we were poor because one, ...we did not have any money. Two, ... we did not have enough food... These were reasons we kept moving. When we moved to WTK, there was still no way for us to earn money. But the good thing was that the monk lived there, too. So, he allowed us to build houses there. So, he allowed people to come and take us to work seasonally and so we...used the money we got from work to buy food... So, this was a good thing, too. But, at the same time this was something that made us poor, too, very poor because we could only earn enough money in a day to buy the next day’s meals.”

The reason Meng’s family kept moving was far from the simple desire to be free. His family constantly moved because they were full of fear. Similar to other Hmong parents in this study, Meng felt safer at WTK although the magnitude of poverty was more significant compared to Ban Vinai due to of the lack of food provided by the government and other agencies.

Overall, these parents felt safer at WTK, which was a factor that contributed to their survival story. WTK was a protected religious territory of the monks, and there was no warfare activity there. Although the monks could not provide legal status to these refugees, they helped Hmong refugees with transitioning to WTK and offered them opportunities to earn money. The monks provided immediate housing for new refugees upon arrival. Those families who were ready to move out of the housing project would then be given a piece of land to build a house. Also, what is remarkable is that these Hmong refugees had different cultural and religious backgrounds than the monks at WTK. Yet, they were able to look beyond these differences and

accepted help from the monks. It is their relationships with the monks that played an important role in their survival stories in Thailand.

### **Late Resettlement in the U.S. Influences Identity Construction**

A third topic these parents frequently brought up during their interviews was how resettlement in the U.S. as an adult impacted their life and identity. They resettled in the U.S. late because they did not come here with the first wave. They lived many more years in Thailand without being recognized as refugees, and it took almost a lifetime for them to come to the U.S.

There are three factors that contributed to these parents' late resettlement in the U.S. Age was the first one. Between the 1970's and 1990's when the first wave of Hmong refugees resettled in the U.S., most of the parents in this study were children and teenagers. Their minor status prevented them from choosing a resettlement plan as they were under their parents' custody. As a survival instinct, most of their parents were doubtful about almost anything they came across during exile. They did not know who to trust. They were unsure of what information was correct and which source was reliable. Some even thought that resettlement in the U.S. might be a scam and believed they would be sent back to the Pathet Laos to be executed instead. Fear of death forced these parents and their families to move numerous times throughout Laos and Thailand. As a result, seven of these nine parents had lived in more than one refugee camp.

A second reason these parents resettled in the U.S. in the 2000's, later than most Hmong refugees, is because they moved from Laos to Thailand after Ban Vinai was already closed. For instance, Mai and her family fled Laos at a later time. By the time they reached Thailand, Ban Vinai was no longer registering or accepting refugees. She explained:

“We lived in Laos and then we escaped Laos and went to the [Laos and Thailand] border. Then, we went to [WTK]. We did not get to live in Ban Vinai... [When] we were [at the border], Ban Vinai was already closed...”

Consequently, Mai and her family did not have a chance to come to the U.S. earlier. Similar to some parents in this study, Mai and her family were left behind not because they refused the resettlement plan, but because they never had the chance to be registered as refugees.

Health was cited as the third reason for resettling in the U.S. later than most, and was only referenced by one family. Dee and Toua's family could not pass the extensive health screening, so they were not allowed to come to the U.S. Dee shared that she wanted to come to the U.S. earlier, but her husband, Toua, did not pass the drug tests as he used opium at that time. She described in an emotional and soft voice, “We wanted to come to the U.S., but my family did not pass the screening process because of [Toua].” Consequently, health impacted this family's resettlement plan.

Furthermore, Sheng an elderly mother in this study, shared with me some rumors about the drug screening process. She told me that she heard stories about older parents who used drugs and would have never passed the drug test. Yet, some people passed the drug test because they asked their children for help. Sheng shared:

“There were some people, older people who use opium but they really really wanted to come to the U.S. So, they would ask their sons or daughters-in-law for a pee sample. They let their sons or daughters-in-law pee in a small plastic bag. They would take that bag and tied it to their waist so when they went in for a urine test, they would pretend that they are going to pee. But, when they were in the bathroom alone, they just poured the

pee from the bag they brought with them to the container. You don't even know how many people cheated by doing that.”

These rumors about how people could find their way to pass the drug test shows just how desperate refugees wanted to seek safety in the U.S.

To conclude, these second wave Hmong parents' identity was shaped by events that happened in the past that continue to affect their present and future. They lived about half of their lifetime as refugees in Southeast Asia. And, because these parents resettled in the U.S. in their adulthood, they see themselves as a unique group of Hmong people.

### **Group Comparisons Influences Identity Construction**

Besides their refugee status, these Hmong parents' perceptions of other people also shaped how they perceived themselves. They compared themselves to other people to show what they are and are not. Parents in this study shared that because of their survival experiences, they did not want and should not have a country attached to their ethnic identity. For instance, although they had lived in the U.S. for about a decade and were naturalized U.S. citizens, they did not think of themselves as Americans or Hmong Americans. They had lived in Laos and Thailand prior to their resettlement in the U.S., but they did not perceive themselves to be Hmong Laotians or Hmong Thais.

As a process of construing their identity, parents in this study compared themselves to other people whom they have had interactions with. They created meanings for each group they compared themselves to. They assigned criteria to assess which group a person belongs to for the purpose of comparison. The focus here is not the accuracy or inaccuracy of the meaning parents in this study assigned to each of the identity categories. Rather, the intention is how the perceived differences of these identity categories helped these parents to better understand their

own identity. In this section, I present the three identity groups Hmong parents in this study compared themselves to: Americans, Hmong American, and Hmong Thai. I discuss why these parents did not identify themselves with these three identity groups and why they did not want a country attached to their identity.

*American.* All of these parents are U.S. citizens, so I asked them for clarification when they referenced Americans as someone different than themselves. Interestingly, all of them gave similar explanations. They thought that Americans speak English and have certain physical characteristics. They have access to education, and they have structured childrearing practices, which include educational support for their children.

Nou, for example, expressed her opinion about who Americans are by commenting on certain skills they have and their skin tone: "It's true that I live in America, but Americans are different from me. They are of a different race. They have their language ... They have White skin." Other parents also talked about these physical characteristics and special qualities when prompted to clarify what American is. For instance, Kia described Americans as "[Those who] have literate parents and their parents are able to help their children [in school]." Kia thought that Americans are people who can contribute directly to their children's education.

In addition, Mai's explanation of Americans included factors such as physical comparisons and social values. She said:

"Americans, they, they are Americans, like those yellow Americans<sup>3</sup>, those White-skinned are Americans. About us, like your mother, your father, and us, we went through the interview process, so we could come live with Americans in America. But the blood in our veins, our blood is real Hmong blood."

---

<sup>3</sup> Yellow or yellow-haired people are common terms among these parents that referred to White-Europeans.

To Mai, what distinguishes her from Americans is her cultural and ethnic heritage. These quotes illustrate that second wave parents thought of Americans as people different from themselves. Their reasons can be grouped into three categories. One, Americans are people of White European descent or people of a different race. Two, Americans possess certain skills these second wave Hmong parents have not yet acquired, such as the English language. Three, Americans have the ability to engage in different childrearing practices, such as having the knowledge and skills to guide a child through his or her educational journey.

*Hmong American.* Five out of nine parents explicitly discussed who Hmong Americans are. To them, Hmong Americans have certain values and experiences that are similar to those of Americans. Although Hmong Americans are also survivors of the Vietnam War, they came to the U.S. in the 1970s and 1980s. They speak English and have an understanding of American culture. They are familiar with the American educational system and thus raise their children in ways that are similar to that of Americans. Hmong Americans are those who engage in mainstream American parenting styles.

PaZoua is one of the parents who provided extensive descriptions of Hmong American. She distinguished between Hmong and Hmong Americans:

“Um, like these Hmong Americans, like they, um, if they’re the elderly, then maybe they’re like us, too. But um if it’s the younger, the younger people who know how to read and write, and know the [English] language, then their support systems for their children are different, okay. For example, when their children come back home [from school], they will do homework with their children. They will help their children with school-related stuff. They read to their children, teach their children. They have schedules for their children, okay. But us, the parents who recently came here, we don’t know how to

read or write. We don't know the [English] language, okay. So, we um, we can't do those stuff... Hmong Americans, they came to this country for a long time ago. They have lived here for so long that their attitudes are different from ours. For us, we still behave in a traditional way just like Hmong people always did in the past (laughing). But among those Hmong Americans, the very old people still behave like us! Those who came here when they were older, like my generation, still behave like us. But those who grew up here, those who came here in 1975, 1980, we would call them Hmong Americans, because they came here when they were younger and they have been through the [U.S.] educational system so they know a lot [about schooling]. That's why the ways of how they help their children in in school are different from those who came later like us."

PaZoua's definition of a Hmong American is comprised of six factors: 1) they came to the U.S. when they were young, 2) they are literate in English, 3) they provide educational support for their children, 4) they can set aside time to be with their children, 5) they have been in the U.S. for decades, and 6) they are more culturally distanced from the concept of traditional Hmong. She compared herself to Hmong Americans and believed that her identity and support system for children were the direct opposite of Hmong Americans, because she does not have the skills necessary to help her children in school. Interestingly, she also believed that age at the time of resettlement is critical in defining one's identity. To PaZoua, older Hmong parents who came to the U.S. with the first wave are not categorized as Hmong Americans because they could still hold on onto their cultural traditions.

To these second wave parents, Hmong Americans are a cultural group that has been exposed to a certain degree of experiences generalizable to the mainstream American culture.

They have adopted more values from Americans into their everyday routine. They have the necessary educational background and skills to help their children succeed in school.

*Hmong Thai*. Eight of the nine parents referenced Hmong Thai a few times. The term Hmong Thai has two meanings, as it can be used to represent two different objects. The first is a noun and refers to a certain geography of northern Thailand. The Hmong Thai region is an area, a village, or a province in Thailand in which there is a large population of ethnic Hmong people. Second, Hmong Thai is used as a pronoun and refers to the ethnic Hmong people who occupy particular regions in northern Thailand.

Similar to the criteria that make one a Hmong American, Hmong Thais are ethnically Hmong but live in northern Thailand. Hmong Thais are Thai citizens. They have secure land to farm and are self-sustained through farming. PaZoua, one of the informants who had lived in northern Thailand with the Hmong Thais, explicitly drew distinctions between herself and Hmong Thais:

“So, we went to live in the Hmong Thai [region]...with Hmong Thais. [There], their children get to go to school. They get to learn Thai. So, there's education...just like the U.S. here. Over there, they called it Soon Dek Lek, so it'd be like Head Start in this country, maybe. Hmong Thais have different lifestyles and occupations, okay. They do rice farming and harvest rice just for the family to eat. They plant corn for sell. They garden vegetables for sell. They grow beans for sell. They grow chili peppers for sell. They grow cabbages for sell.”

PaZoua believed that Hmong Thais have a different lifestyle and can access more resources than a refugee can. First, having access to a Thai school gives a person a Hmong Thai status. Second, Hmong Thais are different because of their lifestyle and relatively stable

occupations; they own land and rely on that land to be self-sustainable. They have options, resources, and tools to support their children and family.

Overall, when second wave Hmong parents in this study talked about identity, the first thing they talked about was an identity that is associated with a geopolitical territory. Therefore, to these parents, identities are tied to the country in which one has the right to laws and resources and are recognized as legitimate. However, when they talked about their own identity, they talked about the lack of rights to laws, protection, and resources. Thus, these parents, unanimously did not identify themselves with a particular country they were born in or have lived in. Instead they thought of themselves as Hmong Survivors, an identity without a nationality suffix.

### **Discussions and Conclusion**

It has been over forty years since these second wave Hmong parents fled their birth country of Laos. A majority of them grew up in Thailand and only one parent has vivid memories of his time in Laos. In Thailand, these parents raised their families and managed to survive despite not being protected or recognized as refugees. Their lack of memories of Laos and brutal experiences in Thailand disqualify them to identify themselves as Hmong Laotians or Hmong Thais. In the U.S., these parents hold U.S. citizenship but they do not consider themselves Hmong American or American because of their limited English skills. They disapprove of the idea of having a country attached to their ethnic identity, because to them, they are a stateless people. They have carried with them the label “refugee” for almost as long as they have been alive.

The identity they desire to be recognized is as Hmong Survivors. The Hmong Survivors identity indicates being both vulnerable as a stateless people and having strengths in moving

forward as refugees. Despite being displaced, these parents have been able to raise their families under extreme adversities with limited to no protection and legitimization at the local, national, or international level. The results of this study are consistent with Hein's (2006) findings that refugee's perceptions of who they are based on how they strive to survive in an extremely adversarial environment.

Furthermore, this research supports the claim that identity construction is based on positioning (Hall, 1990). Parents in this study positioned themselves in relation to a few other identity groups in order to better convey their understanding of their own identity. Nguyen and Brown (2010) found that language and dressing styles are the main categories that Hmong adolescents use to construct their ethnic identity. Similar to these Hmong adolescents, these second wave Hmong parents also believe that language is a category that differentiates themselves from others. Because language is one of the qualifiers these parents have created for one to be Hmong American or American, future research should examine whether improved proficiency in English will result in the alteration of second wave Hmong parents' perceptions of their identity. In other words, when second wave Hmong parents acquire the English language, do they consider themselves Hmong American or American?

These parents' tendency to differentiate themselves from other identity groups adds to Grigoleit's (2006) findings that subgroups of the Hmong community in the U.S. are different. Unlike Hmong youths who draw on physical appearance such as dressing style as a category to construct their identity (Nguyen & Brown, 2010), Hmong parents in this study focus on their experiences, values, and practices as ways to distinguish themselves from others. However, identity is not fixed but fluid; and identity development is an ongoing process. Identity

development is a process in which one will better understand herself by positioning herself in relation to another person or object.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This ethnographic study examines how Hmong parents of the second wave perceive themselves. This study reveals that second wave parents include other Hmong people who had lived in WTK as their in-group members. Future research should explore whether those who had lived in WTK but did not come to the U.S. are also considered in-group members to these parents. Inter-group social interactions and inter-group marriages between the first and second wave of Hmong refugees should also be explored to better understand their identity concept.

It is also important for future research to conduct a comparative study of the parent cohort and their children—especially children who were born in Thailand and moved to the U.S. as youth—to examine the intersection of their identities. These parents also believe that education plays a critical role in one's identity development. So, future research should focus on how their survivor identity helps them to understand the educational system in the U.S. and subsequently, their support system for their children.

Additionally, this is qualitative research that utilized semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. While this method generated rich findings in term of the depth of information about parents' identity, a mixed method study is needed to generate more breadth of information, including the different categories of identities parents compare themselves to and the frequency in which they engage in positioning themselves in relation to others. Future research should include more informants and an equal number of both mothers and fathers in the sample. Overall, while the sample in this research is small, this study discloses important

information about second wave Hmong parents' identity and what they are and what they are not.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Lee Shomow, Judy Ledgerwood, and Carolyn Pluim at Northern Illinois University for their feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

### References Cited

- Daniel, E. V. & Knudsen, J. C. (1995). *Mistrusting refugees*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Grigoleit, G. (2006). Coming home? The integration of Hmong refugees from Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand into American society. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 7, 1-22.
- Hang, M., Anderson, J., Walker, P., Thao, M., Chang, M., & Hestness, L. (2004). *American Paj Ntaub: Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report*.  
[https://books.google.com/books?id=GPC6zQEACAAJ&dq=subject:%22Buddhist+temples+as+refuges%22&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks\\_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjPwIzXjcXoAhVQXM0KHdf9DKMQ6AEwAXoECAAQAQ](https://books.google.com/books?id=GPC6zQEACAAJ&dq=subject:%22Buddhist+temples+as+refuges%22&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjPwIzXjcXoAhVQXM0KHdf9DKMQ6AEwAXoECAAQAQ).
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture*. London: Lawrence and Wishark.
- Hamilton-Merritt, J. (1993). *Tragic mountains: The Hmong, the Americans, and the secret wars for Laos, 1942-1992*. Indiana University Press.
- Hein, J. (2006). *Ethnic origins: The adaptation of Cambodian and Hmong refugees in four American cities*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Hones, D. F. (1999). Crises, community, and the refugee educational narratives of a Hmong father and his adolescents. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(2), 166- 198.
- Malkki, L. H. (1995). Refugees and exile: From "refugee studies" to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 495-523.
- Milton, A. H., Rahman, M., Hussain, S., Jindal, Ch., Choudhury, S., Akter, S., Ferdousi, Sh., Mouly, T. A., Hall, J., & Efird, J. T. (2017). Trapped in statelessness: Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*, 14(942), 1-8.

- Nicholson, B. L. (1997). The influence of pre-emigration and postmigration stressors on mental health: A study of Southeast Asian refugees. *Social Work Research*, 21(1), 19-31.
- Ngo, B., Bigelow, M., & Wahlstrom, K. L. (2007). The transition of Wat Tham Krabok Hmong children to Saint Paul public schools: perspectives of teachers, principals, and Hmong parents. *Hmong Studies Journal*, 8, 1-35.
- Nguyen, J. & Brown, B. B. (2010). Making meanings, meaning identity: Hmong adolescent perceptions and use of language and style as identity symbols. *Journal of Research on Adolescent*, 20(4), 849-868.
- Phan, L. T., Torres Rivera, E., & Roberts-Wilbur, J. (2005). Understanding Vietnamese refugee women's identity development from a sociopolitical and historical perspective. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 83, 305-312.
- Rumbaut, R. G. (2004). Ages, life stages, and generational cohorts: decomposing the immigrant first and second generations in the United States. *International Migration Review*, 38(3), 1160-1205.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Vang, T, & Flores, J. (1999). The Hmong American: Identity, conflict and opportunity. *Multicultural Perspective*, 1, 9-14.
- Warriner, D. (2004). The days is now very hard for my family: the negotiation and construction of gendered work identities among newly arrived women refugees. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Educaion*, 3(4), 279-294.

Xiong, Z. B., Eliason, P. A., Detzner, D. F., & Cleveland, M. J. (2005). Southeast Asian immigrants' perceptions of good adolescents and good parents. *The Journal of Psychology, 139*(2), 159-175.