

Culture and Settlement

The Present Situation of the Hmong in Australia

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Introduction

It has been nearly thirty years since the first Hmong families arrived to settle in Australia in March 1976. Many more families followed until 1992 when the last were accepted from refugee camps in Thailand. Today, they number about 1,800.

Given that most of them were former soldiers or subsistence farmers from Laos, how have they managed with their new life in highly industrialised urban Australia? This chapter will try to shed some light on this question and update the current state of Hmong settlement in the country since the first overview on the subject which I gave at an international conference on Hmong refugees in 1983 (Lee 1986).

Settlement

The Hmong form part of the Indochinese refugee intake that the Australian government took from the newly installed communist regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in 1975. Technically,

they are Lao refugees of Hmong ethnicity. At the beginning, it was relatively easy to get accepted into Australia under the United Nations Convention, so many refugees stayed for only a short time in the camps along the Thai border with Laos. Then there were only simple forms to fill in, but these bureaucratic requirements gradually became more complicated as forms become more formalised and longer. When the never-ending stream of applicants became larger, it was more difficult for Indochinese asylum seekers to be recognised as genuine refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Australia. Some were seen as economic rather than political refugees. During the 1980s, many Hmong families were thus accepted under the Family Reunion programme rather than as political refugees. Under this programme, relatives already living in Australia had to submit sponsorship applications for those left behind in Thai refugee camps. The latter were then interviewed by Australian immigration officials to see if they were suitable for settlement in Australia. If they were accepted, they then underwent medical checks and waited in the Phanat Nikhom transit centre in Chonburi from three to six months for their departure.

Once arrived in Australia, most Hmong refugees chose to live where their sponsoring relatives were already established, mostly in the main cities of the eastern states. By 1984, the Hmong numbered 81 families with 384 persons found in Sydney (215 persons), Melbourne (112), Hobart (37), Adelaide (11) and Canberra (9). The population was relatively young with 55 per cent under the age of eighteen (Lee 1988: 535).

By 1996, the Australian census revealed a total of 1,420 Hmong speakers in Australia dispersed in the following way: 603 in Queensland, 384 in Victoria, 272 in Tasmania, 126 in New South Wales, 29 in the Australian Capital Territory, seven in Western Australia and five in South Australia. Compared to the 1984 population figures, the Hmong have become more numerous through further intakes from Thailand and natural increase, although they have remained one of the smallest ethnic communities in Australia. Queensland has become the state with the largest number of Hmong, due to secondary migration from

the southern states to Cairns and Innisfail. By 1992, intakes of Hmong refugees from Thai camps had virtually ceased with the planned closing of all the refugee camps in Thailand that year by the UNHCR and the Thai authorities. Thus, any demographic changes within the Hmong community in Australia are due to internal population movements, and any increase in the number of Hmong in Queensland means a decrease in other states, particularly in New South Wales.

The first Queensland migration occurred in 1987 when Mr Lao Lee and his family from Sydney started a banana farm in Innisfail and attracted a lot of interest from other Hmong (see also Tapp, this volume). The family was reported to make good money working for itself, compared to the majority of other Hmong who continued to work in unskilled jobs bringing in only small wages. After 1993, other families had decided to sell their family homes and move to Innisfail. Gradually, they were joined by other families from Melbourne and Hobart. The reason for most of them was to go into the banana growing business, with more than twenty families buying banana plantations. Other families migrated to be with relatives, or to live in a tropical environment with vegetation that reminded them of their old mountain life in Laos, unlike other parts of Australia with their monotonous boring gum trees. Those without banana farms themselves often found work with those who had such farms. Others settled in Cairns where they work in hotels and restaurants as cooks and dish-washers, or as vegetable-stall keepers.¹

Apart from this internal migration, the Hmong community in Australia has also experienced change due to some men marrying Hmong wives from Laos, France or the United States. A few young women have also joined their Hmong husbands living in the United States or France. So far three young men and about ten young women have made such a move. Some met their spouses through the internet, others through visits to relatives in the United States or in Australia. By and large, however, this inter-country migration has been small, except for a group of fifteen Hmong families with about 80 persons who were accepted by New Zealand in 1998, but have since all crossed the Tasman Sea to live with the larger Hmong population of Australia.

In mid-2003, it was estimated that there were 104 Hmong families living in far north Queensland (Cairns, Innisfail and Atherton) with more than 800 members. Sydney has 28 families and 140 persons, Canberra seven families with 30 persons, Melbourne more than 70 families and 435 persons, Hobart thirteen families and 95 persons, and Adelaide one family with four people (a Hmong man married to an Australian wife). The 1996 Australian census shows a Hmong family with six persons living in Perth, but not much is known about them as no contact has been possible. The latest trend for the Hmong is secondary migration towards Brisbane where there are more than 60 families and close to 350 persons. The current population number of more than 1,700 Hmong living in Australia has not changed much since 1996. There have been about 40 deaths since 1976, and natural increase has been small as young Hmong couples gradually adopt the Australian habit of having fewer children. The average Hmong couple now tends to have about four children, compared to their parents who may have had from six to eight surviving children a generation ago.

Before 1994 there were no Hmong living in Brisbane, but cheaper housing and a warmer climate began to attract many of those living in the southern states, particularly those from New South Wales and Victoria where by 2003 house prices had become so high that many young families could no longer afford to buy their own homes. Some of those who moved more recently were able to buy houses built on five-acre land parcels that could still be obtained for around \$200,000 when such a sum would not even buy a small building block of 600 square metres in the southern states. Chambers Flat, a semi-rural suburb in southern Brisbane, now has many Hmong families living in this way. Other families bought homes in other nearby suburbs, although they live quite dispersed from one another, unlike the Hmong in other cities who tend to live in close proximity to each other. The reason for this wide dispersal may be due to the fact that different families moved to Brisbane at different times and from different states, not always knowing each other well so that there was less reason to stay close together. They are also the latest of a migration trend, having lived

in other states for a long time and so are now able to look after themselves well. They thus do not feel the need to live near other Hmong, although there is still much interaction between them.

Occupations and Social Mobility

As with most refugees, the Hmong are predominantly political asylum seekers who were accepted into Australia on this basis or on the grounds of family reunion. This means that education and qualifications were not at the top of the criteria for their admission into the country, although the Australian government was selective in regard to a preference for younger people and smaller families. In Sydney in 1987, for example, only twelve of the 80 Hmong families there had members who were older than 50, mainly elderly parents living with their married children. In 1995, it was found that of the 32 Hmong households remaining in Sydney, 37 per cent of their members were in the 0–10 age group, with 54 per cent under twenty (Wang 1998–99: 40). The Hmong population was thus relatively young, compared to the Australian average of 54.3 per cent under 35 years of age, according to the 1991 census.

Laos was not only one of the least developed countries in Southeast Asia, with few schools and road infrastructures that allowed access between cities and country residences, but also had been ravaged by civil war on and off since 1953. The Hmong who lived in rural and remote areas of the country had few opportunities to study in the lowlands where most schools were. More schools were built in Hmong settlements after the 1970s, so that nearly all the younger Hmong who arrived in Australia before 1985 had received at least some primary schooling in Laos, with a few even having completed high school or teacher training college. Most of their parents were, however, illiterate, although some went on to study English in Australia and managed to achieve some literacy. With their subsistence farming background and lack of formal education, many of the older Hmong were eager to take up English lessons as a first step towards settling into the Australian community. In those days, the Australian government was still

generous with migrant and refugee services with no restrictions on the number of hours one spent learning English. Many older Hmong were able to study English for a few years, rather than the 530 hours allocated to new migrants today.

During the early years of their arrival here, it was relatively easy for the Hmong to get factory jobs if they were willing to do any kind of work. Employers were mainly interested in workers who were prepared to learn and to work hard. There was also less competition for jobs, since there were few or no written or general knowledge tests of the type to which today's employers usually subject job applicants. Many Hmong, both men and women, were thus able to obtain paid work within three to six months of entering Australia. They were keen to leave the migrant hostels to settle in the general community, and wanted to work in order to achieve this. Although some sought jobs through the then Commonwealth Employment Service, the majority found work through friends and relatives, or private employment agencies.

Apart from a few months spent studying English, hardly anyone took up re-training to return to their former professions such as teaching or the public service. Most did not have tertiary education, unlike Vietnamese refugees, some of whom were able to re-enter their old fields of work. The Hmong realised too well that they could not compete against native English speakers, nor did they have the time to undertake long courses of studies. Family obligations and the need to re-establish themselves as quickly as possible in their new country meant that the sooner they could become self-supporting, the better it would be for their families. Young children became the priority for parents who, like all migrants, pinned their hopes more realistically on the next generation rather than themselves.

Nevertheless, the employment rate of the Hmong in general has continued to improve over the years. In 1987, for example, 35 per cent of the Hmong community in Sydney were unemployed and of those employed, 93 per cent were process workers doing unskilled factory jobs (Lee 1987). In 1995, Wang (1998–99: 48) discovered that this unemployment rate had come down to 27 per cent (12.5 per cent among females and 33 per cent among males)

with a significant proportion of those employed doing semi-skilled or unskilled jobs, compared to 93 per cent in 1987. The number of skilled workers had also increased (30 per cent among females and 19 per cent among males). The few who could obtain formal qualifications seemed to be in more secure and well paid jobs — a trend that, Wang (1998–99: 49) observes, may continue for those younger Hmong who are still at school today.

During their first years in Australia, the main tangible sign of the Hmong's ability to adapt and move ahead was the possession of cars, at least one for each family. Cars were seen not only as a symbol of wealth, but an essential means for getting to work, for shopping or to socialise. Soon, however, a few Hmong families began to buy their first homes. By the mid-eighties, many of them were living in houses that they had bought or were paying off. Wang (1998–99: 42) found that 42 per cent of the 32 families she surveyed in Sydney already owned their own homes by 1995 and 19 per cent were paying them off. This represents a much higher rate of home ownership than the Australian average of 41 per cent, and far higher than the figures of 13 per cent for Vietnamese and 14 per cent for Cambodian-born refugees. Wang attributes this to the fact that the Hmong prefer to direct their money into more productive use by paying off their mortgages rather than spending it on rental accommodation. Hmong families also help each other with deposits towards the purchase of houses for relatives, thus allowing more of them to own their homes much earlier.

Apart from their own principal place of residence, a number of Hmong families have also gone into real estate investment — with six families now having from one to five investment properties. This high rate of home ownership has enabled many Hmong families to migrate later to Cairns and Innisfail in north Queensland, as mentioned above, using the money they obtained from the sale of their houses to buy farm lands or to finance their move, to purchase new houses, and to lease or buy their banana farms or other businesses. Many of those who did not have this initial capital have also worked hard hiring out their labour in banana plantations, or doing market gardening. This has allowed some to buy their own houses, while others still remain in rented accommodation.

Having been in Australia for thirty years with only a small population and the second generation just starting to get into the work force, the Hmong may not have made much headway into various social and economic strata of the Australian community. However, most have been able to re-establish themselves economically, found employment and become homeowners — even those who have not been able to find permanent employment. Given their background as subsistence farmers, students and soldiers in Laos, they have done well in the face of many language, social and cultural barriers.

The Community

On the whole, the majority of the older Hmong in Australia tend to stay among themselves and have little or no social interaction with people outside their own small community. In a sense, this is no different from most ethnic groups. The first generation of new arrivals often maintains some strong community ties that continue to hold them together as a linguistic and cultural community, while the second generation of children who are born or raised in the new country tends to venture further into the broader community and prefers to mix socially with other groups.

The Hmong are no different in this adjustment pattern. Like other communities, they have learned to adopt various means to help them settle into their new life in a Western and predominantly Christian society. Their traditional social structure of clans and extended families has been disrupted by the long years of war and resettlement as refugees in various parts of the world. No one family has been able to have all its relatives living in one country: there may be a few closely related married brothers together in Australia, but married sisters may have gone to America or France with their husbands, while other relatives may still be left behind in Laos. The Hmong have thus gone through a real global diaspora, and with it many adjustments have had to be made to their cultural practices and traditional social relations.

Among these changes, the most important are those relating to the clan system, used as the primary means of identifying

relationships on the basis of the sharing of a clan name, whom one could marry and whom one could not marry, and who could participate in a family's ritual performances, funerals and celebrations. In the first ten years of their settlement, only eight clans were represented among the Hmong in Australia: Chang, Lee, Moua, Thao, Vang, Vue, Yang and Xiong. Later, members of the Hang and Kue clans were added. But this still does not include all sixteen clans as is commonly found in Southeast Asia. This has somewhat restricted the choice of marriage partners since Hmong can only marry outside their own clan group. In a sense, however, this situation has also forced the Hmong to forge other ties in order to remain close as a community on grounds other than by clan relationship alone.

A new social structure that the Hmong have adopted as an additional means to help in their settlement is the formation of mutual assistance associations. The first such organisation was the Hmong Australia Society (HAS) which was formed by Dr Pao Saykao in Melbourne in 1978.

The Society aims to unite all Hmong residents in Australia as a community in order to maintain the Hmong identity. It serves as the focus where the Hmong turn for assistance in times of need, sickness and bereavement. It also promotes understanding of the Hmong and their culture to the broader Australian society. The Society has a federal body and is represented in different states by state branches with executive committees. The federal executive committee rotates every two years between Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland where most of the Hmong live. Nearly all Hmong in Australia were HAS members.

In the early years, HAS initiated many projects for members, such as teaching Hmong language and culture to Hmong school children, and provided settlement information sessions on various subjects deemed useful for the successful integration of the Hmong into the Australian community. It held social functions, picnics and the Hmong New Year celebration to encourage members to get together as often as possible. In order to promote Hmong culture, classes on Hmong religious rituals were also held for interested young adults to learn to perform rituals in

their own homes. HAS also participated in festivals and celebrations organised by local councils and other groups by lending them Hmong costumes and handicrafts for display, or giving talks and traditional dance performances. Young Hmong dancers became very popular and were often invited to perform in various locations in each state. Within the Hmong community, HAS executive members were kept busy helping with family problems, collecting members' contributions towards funeral costs, and ensuring that members followed the Society's rules regarding funeral arrangements, wedding costs and dowries.

In later years, many of these activities stopped as HAS members became more skilled in finding their own way around the broader community. Hmong language learning through formal classes also ceased, as young children grew up preferring to speak English. Disagreements among members in Victoria and far north Queensland also saw some members splitting away from HAS and forming their own small associations such as the Hmong Federation Council. A need-specific group, the SPK Inc., also came into existence in Cairns to serve the housing needs of new Hmong arrivals in the area. These new groups, and other factors, have now made many of the HAS activities redundant. There have been talks about abolishing HAS, but the majority of members want to keep it going for, if nothing else, it still retains its major function of collecting member contributions for funerals and other emergencies.

One of the original aims of HAS which brought high hopes and great enthusiasm to members in the early years was the teaching of religious rituals and cultural performances for younger members. Although many sessions were held using elderly ritual experts and experienced funeral reed-pipe players as teachers, the programme only ran for a year and yielded few results. The few young men interested in such cultural learning were also too busy working for a living and found the extra time they had to put in during evenings or weekends too demanding. Similar classes are now being held in Melbourne with good participation, and it is hoped that they will be more successful. A few ritual experts were later sponsored from the refugee camps to come and help with the

community's spiritual needs, but their small number did not amount to much in terms of promoting and maintaining the community's cultural knowledge.

The Next Generation

Having been in Australia for nearly thirty years, one of the biggest challenges to the Hmong is the loss of traditions and language among the younger members of the community. Like other migrant groups, members of the younger generation quickly learn to adopt social values and behaviour patterns considered to be alien or detrimental to the beliefs and culture of their parents. Up to the age of six, most children speak Hmong well and are not shy to do so. As soon as they start going to school, however, they gradually come to use more and more English so that by the time they reach puberty few want to speak Hmong or even know how to anymore.

Few also take part or show much interest in religious rituals as they are observed or performed by their parents. The Hmong practices of animism and ancestor worship mean that a family head has to know how to carry out at least some simple rituals, for the Hmong's religion is essentially a family religion. Many elderly Hmong today are concerned that their traditional religious practices will die out after they are gone, and no one will know how to make offerings to them in the afterworld.

Even with the present first generation, this process of cultural and religious degeneration is already occurring with some husbands knowing less about rituals than their wives. Although women can also perform household rituals, the latter are generally men's responsibility. Men who have formal education spent many years away from their families to gain this education, and are thus less skilled in ritual matters. However, their wives are often more familiar with preparing ritual food and may know more about performing small household rituals. They are thus the cultural carriers in such households. Apart from this, it has been found that children who grew up in Australia but who were born overseas are usually more accepting of their parents' religious practices and

associated food offerings to ancestors. They will at least eat ritual food which is often prepared from chicken or small pigs slaughtered for the purpose. Children who are born in Australia and who are not familiar with such practices often shun the consumption of such food, let alone take an active interest in the rituals themselves.

Another challenge to the Hmong in Australia is the difference between the expectations of parents of their children's academic achievements, and the actual outcomes. As stated above, the majority of parents did not have a high school education, but were willing to work hard in order to put their children through the education system at as high a level as possible. They put all their hopes for good jobs and high pay in their children, and have high expectations of the latter achieving these hopes. However, few Hmong children in Australia have been able to fulfill their parents' academic expectations. Many are more eager to get into the work force, even if it means doing unskilled menial jobs, than trying to gain further qualifications. Since their settlement here, less than ten young Hmong have graduated from universities, although most have managed to complete Year 12 in high school and went on to do further vocational training at TAFE colleges. Currently, about half a dozen young men and women are enrolled in bachelor's degree university courses in Cairns, Sydney and Melbourne. It is hoped that this trend will encourage others to follow them.

Conclusion

Where will the Hmong of Australia go to from here? After the first generation, will their children still retain enough of their Hmong cultural heritage to be called Hmong? Or will they be Australian in their hearts and minds, and Hmong only in their appearance? These are questions that many elderly Hmong in Australia, like those in America, are asking themselves. They are wondering whether they have not tried hard enough to change and to fit into their new environment, or whether their children are trying too hard and changing too fast. The big challenges are no longer

related to those of economic survival or the accumulation of material assets. Most families are now comfortably off materially, like the majority of the Australian people. What they face and worry more about is the survival of their cultural identity in the midst of the vast ethnic diversity in this country.

The dilemma of how much to retain of their own culture and how much to change to accommodate the demands of the broader community around them is real, and too complex to dwell on here. Many Hmong realise that they need to change, and are already changing in many respects. There can be no turning back to the old times, for even things in the old country they originated from are fast changing. They have enjoyed freedom and many other benefits coming to live in Australia, and are trying to contribute as much as they can to their new country while still following some of their old traditions in order to maintain some kind of cultural identity. The next generation will have to make their own social accommodation and find their own way ahead — probably more as Australians, but perhaps also as Hmong. If the Hmong of north Queensland are any indication of future trends, members of the younger generation will continue to marry within their own community and maintain their mother tongue even while interacting frequently with non-Hmong people and using English most of the time.

Footnotes

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Total Hmong in Australia, 2003

