

Hmong Refugee Woman Resettlement Experience

Julie Thao | 30302839942

Section 103 | GSI Cynthia Ledesma

May 4, 2020

“We want to come over here [to the United States] to get more education — to study more things — but, we come over here, we cannot study anything,” replied my mother, Ya Vang, when asked why she and her family decided to come to the United States. Amidst the chaos of the Vietnam War extending into Laos in 1960,¹ my mother would be born as the sixth child in 1961 to two parents who would later have a total of twelve children. Living in a small mountainous village west of the Mekong River in Laos, she would eventually face the horror of the Vietnam War and what would later be the consequences of the “Secret War.”

In 1970, at the age of nine, Ya watched as men came and took her oldest brother away to fight alongside General Vang Pao in the Secret War with the United States against Pathet Lao and other communist soldiers. This was usual for Hmong families living in Laos as they became one of the main ethnic groups to be recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States under the Momentum Project to be trained as guerilla warfare fighters and pilots for American soldiers.² When American troops retreated and the war came to an end in 1975 with Pathet Lao and communism taking over Laos, Ya’s brother would eventually come back home to be with the family. However, although the United States retreated, the war did not end for the various Hmong people who continued to live in Laos. Because many Hmong “Had formerly been allies with the United States and supporters of the Royal Lao Government,” they became “targets of postwar mistrust, retaliation, and retribution by the post-1975 communist government of Laos.”³ Fearing that her family may fall victim to the Pathet Lao Communists, her

¹ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998 [1989]), 460.

² Joseph D. Celeski, *Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos: Air Commandos 1964-1975*. (Air University Press: Curtis E. Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, 2019), 92.

³ Mark Edward Pfeifer, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang, *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 3.

father and brother made the decision to move west into Thailand where they sought refuge in the refugee camps with many other Hmong families. After settling in Thailand for a couple of months, Ya's oldest brother who fought in the war would go back to Laos with his family and relatives to retrieve items they left behind. However, her brother and a few of the relatives would never return back to Thailand for they were brutally murdered by the communist soldiers who continued to roam the rural villages of Laos: "They were shot in the head and the kids were held by their legs and smashed against large logs until they died. Had I not gone to the garden that day, my mom would've forced me to go with my oldest brother and I probably wouldn't have lived to this day," revealed Ya in an interview.

Even though the war ended and Ya's family seemed to have escaped the terror of the communist regime, they will never fully be able to live a happy and peaceful life like the one they used to have. They lived each day cautiously, always having to watch behind their backs fearing that a communist soldier might pop up at any time to kill them. Despite this fear, Ya tried to live a normal life as best as possible. Similar to Laos, she would continue to perform her regular duties of a daughter by going farming, gardening, and caring for the cows with her father. As the years passed by, she would eventually marry my dad in June 1979 at the age of eighteen and my dad about twenty-four.

With whispers traveling around the refugee camps about the American dream of escaping war, becoming rich and educated, and having freedom, Ya and her family decided that it would be best for them to go to America. Having married her husband after his family already filled out the immigration sponsorship application, Ya and her husband along with her first born son would all have to stay behind in the camps while her in-laws went to America first by gaining their

immigrant status through “A sponsor who may be a U.S. citizen or legal resident, a U.S. employer, or (especially in the case of refugees) the U.S. government.”⁴ Through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), after waiting a long six months of loneliness and sadness, Ya and her husband were finally able to reunite with their family in Seattle, Washington in 1980, the “Peak year of Hmong refugee resettlement in the United States.”⁵

Unfortunately for Ya, while she reunited with her husband’s family, she would have to leave behind her own family in the refugee camps in Thailand: “I missed my mom and dad a lot... I was very lonely... I didn’t know anything.” Due to the immigration policies and restrictions, Ya suffered from loneliness being away from her family multiple times. In following her husband to the United States, she left behind her mother, father, and her eleven siblings. The only way she could communicate with them was through recording a cassette and mailing it overseas. There was never a guarantee that her family would receive this recording and vice versa. Despite this longing for her family, she was still happy and hopeful that America would make her dreams come true.

In 1980, after reuniting with her in-laws, her new life would finally begin. Ya would be exposed to the harsh realities of a refugee woman beginning life in a foreign world. Her acculturation process would be extremely challenging as she will have to spend at least five years in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class before she is able to acquire the basics of English. “When we first came to the United States, we don't know how to speak English... We just point at what we want and bring it to them.” After asking how her interactions with other

⁴ Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Desiree Qin-Hillard, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the New Immigration* (Routledge, 2001), 182.

⁵ Kou Yang, “Research Note: The Hmong in America: Twenty-Five Years after the U.S. Secret War in Laos” (The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 166.

people were like, she continuously replied that because she didn't understand English, there was really no interaction at all. One incident however, challenges this statement. In Seattle, Ya's family lived in two different apartments. At one of her apartments, she got into an unintentional confrontation with an African American family. "I live upstairs... I didn't know... I just spit down and then her head come out at the same time... I spit on her head... I run down and try to go clean and then she almost hit me... why I spit on her head? I say I don't know. At that time, I don't know how to speak English...then the boy come out... he hold my chest [Ya shows the interviewer that the boy is grabbing onto her shirt around the chest area] and then he almost hit me..." Ya's lack of English literacy resulted in her being in a violent situation. If it was not for a Thai man who walked by and stopped the incident before anything happened, my mother would have probably ended up being physically assaulted. Although Ya states that she didn't really interact with anyone because of the language barrier, this incident proves otherwise. Interestingly, she goes on to use this particular incident as her reasoning to justify the anti-blackness that occurs in many Asian American perspectives. However, she also acknowledges that her lack of English has limited her interaction with others; thus, the possibility of not fully understanding one another.

In addition to the burden of the language barrier, Ya also faced sexual harassment multiple times by the same man at a separate apartment while in Seattle. "The neighbor... come and look through the window... made me very scared... and they unzipped their pants and they did this [hand motions up and down showing someone who is stroking their penis]." In another scenario, "I was laying down on my bed — it's in the living room — and then I look up and I saw a guy... and he was watching me... I scared." Oftentimes, Ya had to stay home alone with

her baby while her husband was out either somewhere random or at school. Although she did find relief in sharing these experiences with her husband, nothing was ever done about it. She continued to be watched by this man while she was in the bathroom, walking around, or just sitting in her living room. She didn't know how to report this; yet alone, she couldn't even speak English to explain the situation. As an Asian American woman with no English literacy, she became a victim to the male figures who could easily abuse her body. It's no surprise that there aren't many reports of Asian American women who were sexually harassed during this time. Many did not speak English, did not know how to report, or probably just didn't understand the situation that was happening — just like Ya.

Aside from the English Language, the Hmong had a difficult time assimilating into American culture, learning their customs, and practicing basic health hygiene. Many Hmong felt “Intensely lost in America, where they have to figure out how to use toilets and gas stoves and how to fill out welfare forms.”⁶ When arriving in Seattle, Ya's in-laws had to teach her how to use the stove, water, and other housing utilities. She also explained that when she went to the store, “We still carry *lub kawm* [a straw basket used in Laos/Thailand similar to a backpack with two strings attached] to carry a large bag of rice to the bus stop. We so stupid.” Another important thing to note here is the lack of support from an American representative. Ya mentioned that because they didn't have a sponsor, they didn't know anything. Initially depending on her in-laws to support her, she was hopeful of becoming a great American citizen; however, once forced to move out, Ya would live an independent life with her small family where she would learn everything on her own.

⁶ Takaki, 463.

Through welfare, Ya and her family were able to survive in Seattle. However, once the welfare ended, secondary migration to Sacramento, California became the solution for Ya's family in November of 1982 in order to apply for new welfare and reunite with extended family members. "This highly distinctive resettlement pattern is the result of delicately balancing the most essential substances of Hmong tradition with pragmatic considerations such as job prospects, access to language and job training programs, extended family and clan obligations, changing federal policies for Refugee Cash Assistance, changing welfare eligibility regulations between the states,"⁷ and more.

It was to no surprise that because of her lack of English skills and thus failure to acquire a job, she would have to depend on welfare as her means of survival for about five years. However, as a resilient person, she refused to continue to beg for food, something she did not have to do when living back in Laos and Thailand. Instead, in 1987-1989, she resorted to the skills she knew of in order to survive in America — farming and gardening. Ya shares in an interview the poverty stricken and challenging times she battled in America, "We wake up at 6am and go farm until 10pm... We grow vegetables, long beans, cucumber... on the weekend, we sold these at the farmer's market and in that whole three years, we saw we only have \$10,000." Raising two children and caring for her husband and his parents, she knew she could not continue living like this. Furthermore, she ended up getting a job as a house cleaner for a Japanese American family, but even this was not enough to sustain her family financially. In 1994, Ya moved on to work as a baker for "Uncle Jerry's" bakery shop where she made cookies and didn't really have to be literate to achieve this job. However, once it closed down in 1997,

⁷ Jac D. Bulk, "Hmong on the Move: Understanding Secondary Migration" (*Ethnic Studies Review: The Journal of the National Association for Ethnic Studies*, 1996), 7.

she would be unemployed for about two months until early 1998 when she got hired for a warehouse job called Hunter Douglas.

Although this new and current job is not that of a laundry or garment sweatshop, it's consistency of employees and shared working conditions reflect the exploitation of immigrant workers seen in the past as with the Chinese American immigrants. Sweatshops became prevalent "By the 1890s... while evocative of hard work, harsh discipline, and bad conditions, the real meaning of all of these terms lies in their graphic and physical description of the system of exploitation by which small employers, usually contractors, would only profit by extracting every ounce of value from the labor of their employees."⁸ Moreover, Ya shares in her interview that the majority makeup of employees are "Filipino... more than Hmong people... [but] mostly all Asians, only a few white people." Without realizing it, Ya paints a picture of the harsh realities of immigrants and refugees in the labor workforce. When describing the conditions of her job, Ya replied with, "Easy... because I don't do very hard things... I only do the thing that I know how to make... I don't know writing, thinking, spelling. That is hard for me. My supervisor tells me to do everything." Ya's job description consists of assembling blinds and carrying loads of heavy items from one place to another. After working there for about twenty-one years, she continuously complains of back, shoulder, arms, and leg pain. In her eyes, the laborious and harsh job she possesses is much easier than one that requires English skills. Despite these conditions, she continues to sacrifice her mental and physical well being for the sake of her family: "If I don't go work... I have no money and there is nothing to do. So I have to go everyday and go straight to the thing I do everyday."

⁸ Daniel Soyer, "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now" (*New Labor Forum*, 1999), 36.

Ya's English literacy is still at a minimum, but she appreciates that her determination to acquire these skills have allowed her to acculturate into American society easier. She shares that she does not have any friends outside of the family circle, but because her English skills have increased tremendously compared to when she just arrived in the United States, she is now able to communicate with the African American, Asian, Latinx, and White community that resides in her social sphere. In the past, she seemed to fear everyone: "... come to the United States, everything we very scared... they try to rape, they try to grab..." In addition to the experiences she encountered at both her apartments in Seattle, Ya became wary of the people around her. Each event seemed to influence the way she interacted and prejudiced other people of color, but after learning the English language she came to understand the other communities to be similar to hers — trying to survive in America.

Ya expresses lots of pride of being Hmong in this American society. Despite the obstacles and hardships she faced and continue to face in America, she has no regret of coming to America. Furthermore, Ya does not make much money in America, but she is satisfied with the fact that she is making more than what she would have if she stayed in Thailand. Although she is not able to pursue the American dream, she is living it through her children who are aspiring in higher education. While the majority of her family members are now in the United States, there is no day that passes by that she does not miss her few brothers and sisters who continue to live in Thailand and Laos. Living in America has its benefits, but we cannot ignore the traumatizing experiences that Ya, a refugee, encountered simply because of the lack of English literacy, financial support, cultural understanding, and other major factors that play into her American acculturation journey. Ya is only one example of the many Hmong refugee women whose

narratives continue to be suppressed and influenced by the social and historical contexts of America.

Bibliography

- Bulk, Jac D. "Hmong on the Move: Understanding Secondary Migration." *Ethnic Studies Review: The Journal of the National Association for Ethnic Studies*, 1996.
- Celeski, Joseph D. *Special Air Warfare and the Secret War in Laos: Air Commandos 1964-1975*. Air University Press: Curtis E. Lemay Center for Doctrine Development and Education, 2019.
- Pfeifer, Mark Edward, Monica Chiu, and Kou Yang. *Diversity in Diaspora: Hmong Americans in the Twenty-First Century*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.
- Soyer, Daniel. "Garment Sweatshops, Then and Now." *New Labor Forum*, no. 4, 1999.
- Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo M., Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Desiree Qin-Hillard. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the New Immigration*. Routledge, 2001.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998 [1989].
- Yang, Kou. "Research Note: The Hmong in America: Twenty-Five Years after the U.S. Secret War in Laos." The John Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Biography Transcript

Interviewer: Julie Thao

Interviewee: Ya Vang

Interview Setting: Interview conducted at the home of the interviewee in Sacramento, CA on April 1st, 2020

Affiliation with Interviewee: daughter

JT: The first question, where did you grow up?

YV: Where? I grew up in Laos. When I was like a little teenager? I don't know. Like 12 or 10, I live in Laos, but before that we came to the camp in Thailand. So I grew up in Thailand.

JT: Okay, so next question. Could you tell me a little about your parents?

YV: My parents? My parents they are nice. They are very hard workers. My dad always goes farm and always tells me to go farm. And we have cows too. I have to go take care of the cows for my dad too. And what?

JT: Okay, so the next question is when did you move to Thailand?

YV: When? We moved to Thailand in 1975.

JT: How did you get to Thailand?

YV: By walking. Yea we just walked. Walk around maybe 2-3 hours then we get to Thailand already. [laughs]

JT: Okay. So why did you decide to go to Thailand?

YV: Why? Because my dad and my brother, they said it's not good to live in Laos. So they decided to move. They said they afraid of the communist soldiers coming. So they decide to move out to Thailand. My oldest brother was a soldier. They come take him to fight with Vang Pao.

JT: Your brother fought in the war? Did he survive?

YV: Yes, but he die later. He and his wife they go back to Thailand to get the rice. He take all his kids too, only one who can't walk stay home. They were shot in the head and the kids were held by their legs and smashed against large logs until they died. Had I not gone to the garden that day, my mom would've forced me to go with my oldest brother and I probably wouldn't have lived to this day

JT: When you were in Thailand, did you go to school?

YV: Nope, I never go school. My dad wants to go farming. My dad wants me to go farm with my dad and my mom [laughs] I took care of the cow.

JT: So when you moved to Thailand, were you still living with your mom and dad then?

YV: Yea.

JT: What about your husband's mom and dad?

YV: No, they live by themselves. My husband and my... my husband's mom and dad they come to Thailand too. We live in the same camp.

JT: So the next question is, how did you come to the United States?

YV: Um we... They come to do the... I don't know how to say it, but the immigration... The people, the American people, they come and they come and apply to come over here.

JT: Did you have any kids yet?

YV: Yea, we have one kid. The baby almost 1 month and then we come to Bangkok and we come stay one week over there. The baby is one month. And then we come over here in May. I think we come over here in May. May, I think May 5 or May 7. I forgot the date.

JT: How did you feel travelling with your 1 month child?

YV: Well I don't really remember. [laughs] Because at that time I was so little. I don't know anything, just like dreaming. Just like dreaming. When we get here, we don't remember anything. We don't know, we don't remember how we fly. [laughs] it was just like the bird [referencing the airplane].

JT: So the next question is, So why did you decide to come to the United States?

YV: Why? Because most of the people want to come over here so my husband... parents my mother and father in law, they came first. So my husband and me we come later. We want to come over here to get more education, to study more things, but we come over here we cannot study nothing. And we stay over there because we only stay in the camps so we cannot do anything, we just stay in there like right now we stay inside the house like Corona.

JT: How was your refugee camp experience?

YV: We stay in the refugee camps. We just go like when we want money we just go work for somebody outside like the Thai people and work, farm for them and they pay us little bit. \$10, no \$15 bucks a day. So that mean maybe over her \$2 a day or maybe \$1 a day.

JT: who came with you to the United States? Did your whole family come? Who was left behind?

YV: Uh me, my husband, and my first baby boy. We come alone and my mother, father in law and my brother in law they all coming first. So dad, my mom and my dad they still in the camp [cries]. Don't make me cry. [brief pause] Over here is better. When I come over here and my mom and my dad, my brother they both still in Thailand. My sister they both in Thailand. So when we, we don't have a phone to call, so when we want to know each other, so we just make a... we record in the cassette and then send it to them. I missed my mom and dad a lot when I come. I feel like I very lonely. And I don't know. When I only one kid and then I have to come, everything I have to do so I don't know anything. I get in a lot of trouble. So that's why when we talk, my tears come out. That's it.

JT: When you first got to the United States did you know anyone who was already here?

YV: Yea, my mother and father in law and my sister in law, they came over here first. When we come, they teach us how to use the water, use the stove. So they teaching us so we don't have a sponsor. We just come and stay with them for a couple days and then they find us a house and we have to go live by ourselves. Yea. But we don't have a car. Go anywhere, we just take bus. And when we go to the store, we still carry the *kawm* [translation: a straw basket similar to a back pack on your back used to carry items] [laughs]. No car. Yea no car, so when we go store we still take the *kawm* to go to the store and carry stuff to the bus stop. Carry a large rice bag. [laughs continue].

JT: When you came to the United States, was there any economics or money problem that you faced or like finding a job or anything or social? Actually let's talk about the economic aspect first.

YV: Oh when we get here, we apply for welfare, so we get money from welfare. Food stamps and cash from the welfare for us, to help us pay for the place we live and food stamp for us to buy food.

JT: Okay, so social, any challenges you faced that are related to social? So like um, later I will talk a little more about this, but when you talk to people of different ethnicity or race, so like white people, black people, Mexican people, or just like about or like could be talking or just living with them in your house/neighborhood, how did that affect you? Or how was it like to live with them?

YV: So when we first came to the United States, we don't know how to speak English and we just, like when we go get something that we don't know, we just bring it to them and show them by pointing what we want. One time when we lived in the apartment, the neighbor, yea the next door people, they come and look at the window and do something like they try to show their "thing" and made me very scared. Like when they come, they look through the window and they unzipped their pants and they did this [hand motions up and down showing someone who is stroking their penis] last time, one time, I very scared [laughs]. At day time, my dad, no my husband he is not home so I have to... So our apartment is down like on the ground level, they come and they try to look at the window and see if we inside or not. I was laying down on the, on my bed, it's in the livingroom and then I look up and I saw a guy up there and he's watching me. And then I scared and I stay and then when he walked away, and then I go out. I don't know why I go out. I scared, but why I go out. Running to another neighbor, like the next apartment is Laos people. I run there, go inside, and I stay inside with them, I scared. But one upstairs is Hmong people up there. But the guy that lives up there next door to the Hmong people too so I scared so I have to go to the next building like across. So that is Laos people.

JT: So he did that and he was also just watching you while you were laying down?

YV: Yea. One time at night time, my baby was crying and crying a lot and our bathroom window was like that one [motions to a small window in our house] and then I stay in the bathroom, turn on the light, and I look and a guy was up there and watching me too. [laughs] so that is why I was very scared. That apartment. It's not, we only have a couple Asians — like 2 Laos, 2 family Laos and 2 family Hmong. But the other family Hmong is Green Hmong, so first time we come, we don't know what they say. They say "Sit down" we don't know what they say.

JT: How did you come to live in Sacramento, CA now where you are currently living and why did you settle here?

YV: Because first we come to Seattle, WA and we stay over there and they say we don't know how to speak English and get a job. They said over here, they have welfare down here in Sacramento. In California, they have welfare over here and over there, they stopped the welfare so we decide to come over here. We have family over here too. First they come over here so they said over still have welfare, so we come over to get welfare. That's why we come over here.

JT: When you come here, are there any group that when you see them, you are afraid of them?

YV: Well, we almost scared of black people. Yeah because I didn't know. I just spit down and then her head come out at the same time. It on her head so I just go and I said I go clean it. I try to go clean it [laughs] i try to go clean it and then she had a brother. I think only her and her brother. Me I carry Koua [baby boy] on my back and then we go, like we want to go out to the farm to the garden on the side of the apartment. I lived upstairs and they live on the middle. They live second floor and I live third floor. We go to the ladder and my head go out and spit and her head come out and same time my spit go on her head. I run down and try to go clean and then she almost hit me and then say why I spit on her head. I say I don't know. At that time, I don't know how to speak English. I don't know why one word that I know is that I spit on her head that first time. I don't know how to speak English. I just say , I think I say sorry or something. I

just go clean it and motion that I spit on her head. And then the boy and they almost hit me and try to say that I clean it for them. After that I go I don't go upstairs, and stay inside, I go to the garden and when I come back, they come back and run back to stay downstairs and wait for me and when I come to the apartment again through the downstairs and they come back and hold my chest and the boy almost hit me. You know the Thai he had the store down the road and we usually go store over there. At the time he just come by so he say "what happened" I told him I stay up there I spit on her head and then I try clean and then she mad so she want hit me. The guy said something to the boy and the girl so I just go. He come and stop. If he didn't come and stop, they hit me.

I scared. So I come here and that's why every time, I scared, I dream that I stay at that apartment. Everything falling and the stairs and hallway walk up there, not straight but motions circle. I very scared. One time, I told my auntie to *ua neeb* [spiritual healing] to call my spirit back so I don't dream about this anymore. [laughs]

JT: Are you working right now? How did you find this job? Who works with you?

YV: Mostly Filipino people work more people than Hmong people. Mostly all Asians. Only a few Americans (white). My cousin worked there so they just tell me like they have a job over there, the name of the company so I just go and apply.

JT: Did you have any other jobs in the United States?

YV: No, one time we go farming, we grow vegetables. After that I go work. When we not go work yet, I go farming. Yea we go farming in 1987,88,89, we grow vegetables, long beans, cucumber, like that. We sold these at the farmer's market. We make only, one year, I don't know. We farming 3 years, the first time, we get 10,000. That's it. The whole 3 years, we saw we only have 10,000. The first time we saw we had thousand money.

JT: Since you are also working everyday, is there anything you wish you can do that you weren't able to do?

YV: No, For me, if I don't go work, I stay only. I have no money and there is nothing to do. So I have to go everyday and go straight to the thing I do everyday. Now if I stay home, I just watch T.V all day I feel very sleepy. If I sewing all day, I don't sleep.