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Tomoko Otake

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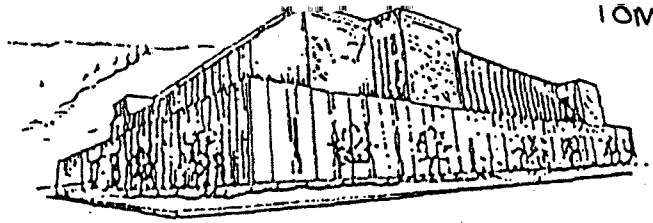
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TRADITION AND TRANSFORMATION:  
A PROFILE OF THE HMONG COMMUNITY IN MISSOULA, MONTANA

by

Tomoko Otake

B.A. Osaka University of Foreign Studies, 1992

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

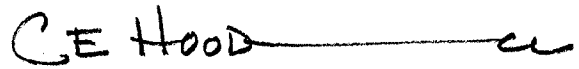
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University of Montana

1995

Approved By



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Dean, Graduate School

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Tradition and Transformation : A Profile of the Hmong community in Missoula, Montana

Director: Charles E. Hood, Jr. ~~CEH~~a

This professional project examines how the Hmong people who settled in Missoula, Mont., nearly 20 years ago have adjusted to a life in a new culture. The Hmong began to arrive in the United States in 1976, after the CIA-financed Hmong army led by Gen. Vang Pao lost its war against the communism forces in Laos. About 130,000 Hmong came to the United States as refugees to avoid persecution from the communist government of Laos. Some 260 Hmong people now live in Missoula, but the number was once much larger.

The project consists of two parts. Part I titled, "Maintaining Hmong Cultural Values and Adjusting to American Society: The Story of Tou Yang," profiles a 31-year-old Tou Yang, who overcame the trauma of losing his home in Laos and becoming a refugee, to find success in the United States as a bilingual tutor for Hmong students. His work in bilingual education was rewarded recently as he became the National Bilingual Instructional Assistant of the Year in 1995.

Over the years he has not only helped Hmong children succeed academically, but also taught them the importance of preserving Hmong culture, including its language, history, music, art, customs and religion. He is one of the dwindling number of young Hmong in Missoula who feel keenly the danger of their cultural extinction.

Part II titled, "Past, Present and Future: The Missoula Hmong Community in Context," describes the Hmong when they first arrived in Missoula in 1976, recounts their struggle to adapt to the American culture, and compares their experience to that of Hmong in other U.S. cities. Missoula officials recall how shocked they were by the arrival of the Hmong, who were not familiar with modern technology and whose lifestyle was totally different from the one they found in America. Today, many of the Hmong in Missoula have survived the drastic transition process, adjusted to the harsh Montana weather, the lack of job opportunities and a welfare system in Montana, which is less generous than some states. Part II also looks at other Hmong communities in America, in an attempt to put the Missoula experience into a national perspective. It examines the advantages and disadvantages of living in larger U.S. Hmong communities such as Fresno, Calif. and Minneapolis, Minn.

## PART I: MAINTAINING HMONG CULTURAL VALUES AND ADJUSTING TO AMERICAN SOCIETY: THE STORY OF TOU YANG

When Tou Yang greets people in his office at the Missoula School District 1 Administration building, he has a set of phrases he always uses.

“Hi, how are you doing?” he asks, looking up from his computer. Turn his own question on him and he’ll reply cheerfully: “Pretty good!”

Yang, a Hmong bilingual tutor and cultural class teacher for Hmong children in Missoula, is comfortably dressed in a half-sleeved blue polo shirt and jeans, his gold necklace peeking from the neck. The 31-year-old, a father of five, speaks the adopted English language with confidence, enunciating every word clearly. And when he jokes and laughs, his round face gets rounder, and his eyes narrow to slits.

“How are you doing?” and “Pretty good!” are among the most conventional phrases in the American language. Yet I’ll always connect them to Yang, whose repeated use of them in his office or on the phone suggests why he has been so successful in his adopted culture. Whatever his actual conditions may be, or his actual feelings may be, he always is doing “pretty good.”

Of course, things haven’t always been “pretty good.” He has had many hard times, almost overwhelming times.

He is one of hundreds of thousands of Hmong people in Laos whose fate was influenced by the Vietnam War and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency’s secret involvement in Southeast Asia.

He has lived through an incredible period of tragedy and transformation during the last 20 years. When he says he is doing “pretty good,” it’s a sign of his strength — a strength that comes from having experienced and overcome the trauma of war.

Today Yang exemplifies the young Hmong refugees from Laos who are surviving in this country, and yet still holding on to the cultural traditions of the Hmong. He has just been named the National Bilingual Instructional Assistant of the Year for 1995.

The award symbolizes all he has achieved during his years in the United States.

His American life began in November 1987, when he first flew to Missoula from a refugee camp in Thailand. The first thing he had to do was to get used to the Montana weather.

“Everything was different,” Yang said, thinking back for a moment. “We never had snow in our country. The winter was not this cold.”

– He adjusted to the lifestyle of this most modern and technologically advanced country. In Laos, the lives of most Hmong were based on farming, fishing, hunting and trading. He used to wake up to the crowing of roosters in his yard, not to an alarm clock. His primary means of transportation was foot; now he commutes to the office by car.

His English has improved to the point that he appears to speak effortlessly. He took a few English as a Second Language (ESL) classes when he was in the refugee camp, but his English was not as good as it is today, he says.

But adjusting to American society is only part of his experience during the last two decades. Like the 130,000 other Hmong refugees who fled war-torn Laos, to settle into the United States, he is a living example of how ordinary people’s lives can be irreversibly changed by war.

The Hmong’s roots go back as far as 1600 B.C. in China, when the Shang dynasty was prosperous. The Hmong have been an ethnic minority group for thousands of years, and always have been on the move. Called “Miao,” meaning “savage,” or “barbarians” in Chinese, they moved to the southern part of China over time and made their living by farming. Despite a long history of Chinese oppression, the Hmong maintained their independence by living at dizzying heights in the mountains. In the early 19th century, the continued oppression drove many of the Hmong from China into Southeast Asia, where they settled in the mountains of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma. It is the descendants of the Hmong from Laos who now live in the United States.

The Hmong involvement with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency during the Vietnam War dramatically influenced the fate of Yang and hundreds of thousands of others. Although international law prohibited foreign intervention in Laos, the U.S. government saw the country as a critical battleground in its efforts to combat Communism in Southeast Asia. With Communist forces of the Pathet Lao rising in the country, Hmong leaders, being slowly accepted by Laotians since their migration to Southeast Asia, felt they should fight to prevent a Communist takeover. From 1961 to 1975, Gen. Vang Pao, the charismatic leader of 250,000 Hmong people in Laos, mobilized Hmong guerrilla soldiers, allying with the CIA and leading the "Secret War of Laos." The Hmong soldiers contributed greatly to the CIA operation by their ability to fight in the mountain jungles.

But when the war was over in 1975, Vang Pao's army and the CIA were on the losing side, with 30,000 Hmong soldiers dead. The Pathet Lao then initiated a bloody repression of the Hmong, accusing them of being CIA mercenaries during the war. More Hmong people were killed from 1975 to 1978 than during the entire 14 years of war. In 1975, Vang Pao and his followers decided to flee to the United States, and one of their destinations was western Montana. Since then, about 130,000 Hmong have sought refuge in the United States. Today about 20,000 Hmong are in the only remaining refugee camp in Thailand.

Tou Yang was only 11 years old when the CIA pulled out of Southeast Asia in 1975. In those days he was unaware of what exactly was happening around him. All he remembers about the war is that his father was a nurse for the CIA-financed Hmong army, and his mother was an airport guard. Because of their involvement, they feared that the newly established Communist government in Laos would persecute them. Right after the war, the Yangs moved to a small village in central Laos. It was one of the villages the Hmong created in the jungle to hide themselves from the Communist soldiers. The sons carried rifles to guard the community for two years.



But with a 1978 agreement between the Laotian and North Vietnamese governments that brought highly trained Vietnamese soldiers to Laos, the sheltered life of the Hmong began to be threatened. One night Communist soldiers came into Yang's village and took it under control.

Yang didn't believe in Communism. He had heard that Communist soldiers would massacre all the Hmong, even children, because of their connection with the CIA. In other Hmong villages the Communists were bombing and burning the fields, driving the people out of the land. The soldiers who came to his village didn't kill children, but took away those Hmong they believed had fought against the Communists. The soldiers said those people were being trained as soldiers, but they never came back. Yang was convinced they were killed. The Communists also didn't allow the Hmong much freedom. Permission was required to go outside the village.

Yang's quest for freedom might have originated in his Hmong roots. "Hmong" means "free" in their language. One day Yang fled the village with six friends. He was 14 years old.

"I ran away and stayed in the jungle for a month," Yang recalled. Hiding in the jungle was "very difficult," he said. The youths wanted to escape from Laos, but didn't know how to get to the border, and to a Thai refugee camp.

They soon ran out of food. The starving kids ate wild pumpkins and whatever plants were available. Finally, hunger drove them back to the area of their village, where a corn field offered food.

Yang's mother's instincts told her exactly where to look for her son, Yang recalled, smiling. She spotted the smoke of a fire over which Yang and his friends were cooking corn, and quietly approached them. She called Yang's name, but the boys kept themselves hidden, afraid that she might be with Communist soldiers. It took her 20 minutes to persuade the boys to finally come out.

“My mother was crying and crying,” Yang said. “She was...very worried about my life in the jungle.” Then she cooked the fresh rice, pork and beef she had brought with her. “We had a little party by the shelter that night,” he said.

After the meal, his mother asked the boys to come home. The boys were reluctant first, but decided to return. Yang remembers his mother saying: “If we die, we should die together. If we live, we should live together.”

When Yang came back, he thought the village looked “very strange.” While he was away, Communist soldiers had increased their presence in the village. Yang still remembers the first night back, when he lay down at home and thought of what might happen to him. He couldn’t sleep because he was frightened that the Communists might punish him for running off.

His father begged the Communist soldiers to let Yang off, and he was luckily spared from punishment. Meanwhile, the soldiers embarked on a propaganda campaign, selling their story of the alleged crimes Vang Pao and the CIA committed against the Laotian people. At a meeting, the soldiers told villagers that communism was good. “They encouraged us to be nice to them,” Yang said. “They were not that bad, that’s what they were trying to say.”

In 1980, when he was 16 years old, Yang was allowed to attend a high school in a city near Vientiane, the capital. It was about two days’ walk away from his village. Yang’s parents thought it was important for Yang to have education, especially because he was their only son. To send their children to school in the cities was common among Hmong parents who, for a long time, knew the importance of education despite the fact many didn’t have formal education themselves. After three months of schooling, he met an old friend, Tou Lee. Lee asked Yang if he wanted to go to Vientiane for shopping.

After the pair spent a night at Lee’s cousin’s house in Vientiane, Lee disclosed his real intentions to Yang. He planned to escape from Laos. He asked Yang to join him. At that time, every Hmong wanted to escape from Laos in the wake of increased repression

against the Hmong by the Communists, Yang recalled. But Yang didn't think it was possible. Lee said he knew some people who knew how to cross the Mekong River to a Thai camp. "Are you sure?" I asked, and he said, "yes," Yang said. He knew he would never be able to see his parents once he escaped. But it was the chance of a lifetime to seize freedom. "I'm the only one who left mom and dad behind and escaped alone with my friend," he said.

He walked toward the border with a group of 200 Hmong people, using jungle trails to avoid the Pathet Lao soldiers. The soldiers would kill any Hmong fleeing from the country.

At midnight on March 15, 1981, after five hours of walking, he reached the border. The Mekong River was running ahead of him. The river, which was six to eight miles wide in winter, represents the border between Laos and Thailand, and everyone who wanted to get to the Thai camps had to cross it. People who tried to cross during the day were often spotted and shot by Pathet Lao soldiers. Many babies drowned in the river, too, Yang said. To get a ride on a boat, the refugees needed \$200-250 to pay the Thai boatmen. As Yang didn't have enough money, he decided to swim across. He cut down a banana tree, trimmed off the bottom and top parts and used it as a float. He hung on to the tree with one arm and swam with the other for five hours. After reaching the other side of the river, he ran fast to a road, because he heard some Thai soldiers were waiting in ambush to rob the Hmong refugees at gunpoint. Luckily he made it to the camp safely. He had his money — four silver coins and a little Laotian money, worth about \$100 altogether — hidden in his shoes. That was all he had before starting a new life in the Thai camp at the age of 17.

As soon as he reached the Ban Vinai camp, he realized what it was like to be separated from his family. He was in the reception area of a building, where newly arrived refugees would join their family and relatives. For a whole day, he sat there alone,

but no one came to pick him up. He looked back on everything and regretted having coming alone. "I missed my parents a lot. I was very sad," he said.

The next day, a relative who knew Yang's parents recognized him and took him to the building he lived in.

The Ban Vinai camp, built by refugees with United Nations funds, had for years the biggest concentration of the Hmong refugees in the world. Reports say the camp kept expanding in the '80s until it sheltered about 45,000 Hmong refugees in 1986. The years Tou Yang spent in Ban Vinai —from 1981 to 1987 — were crucial to his life: he got married and eventually became a father to three kids. In 1982, the 18-year-old Yang married 15-year-old Ia Vang. It was common for the Hmong people to start a family at a young age, although the trend has changed since their arrival in the United States. In the same year Yang passed a test, which enabled him to get training as a medical assistant. He did health screening and gave vaccinations to people. Although the pay was low — he was paid about \$25 a month — he found pride in his work.

In 1983, he was one of two people chosen from 300 applicants to become a laboratory technician. He went through a 16-month training, and began to examine samples of bacteria through microscopes to detect diseases such as malaria and gonorrhea. In a camp where there were only one or two doctors, his work was considered valuable, he said.

The life in the camp was fun, and he didn't want to leave, Yang recalled. There were many others like him. For many Hmong Ban Vinai offered a safe, peaceful haven close to their homeland. The number of the Hmong who resettled in the United States per year peaked at more than 20,000 in 1980. From 1981 to 1986, however, only a few thousand left Thailand each year, not filling the refugee admission quota set by the United States. And that was giving a headache to the Thai government, which was weary of taking seemingly endless number of refugees. Thailand already had 50,000 Hmong living in the highlands as Thai citizens, plus more than 200,000 Cambodian displaced

persons, 12,000 Chinese and 40,000 Vietnamese refugees, and even some illegal immigrants from Laos. From 1983 on, Thailand pressured the Hmong in Ban Vinai to either migrate to the United States or repatriate to Laos under the communist regime. Camp officials refused new arrivals, and sent back undocumented residents who had sneaked into Ban Vinai from Laos. In the summer of 1986, Thai officials announced that 1987 would be the last year that refugees would be admitted in the West. It was under such a pressure that Yang signed up for an interview with U.S. embassy officials from Bangkok to seek resettlement in America.

In March 1987, Tou Yang, Ia and their little daughters, Na Lee, Vi Xai and Kao Nou, left Ban Vinai for the Phanat Nikhom transitional camp near Bangkok, where they went through English language and American culture training. On Nov. 30, 1987, the family landed in Missoula, Mont. Like many others who came to the United States, they picked their destination based on the presence of relatives. Ia's uncle, who had settled in Missoula earlier, was their sponsor.

Yang had no idea his life would evolve this way when he was living in Ban Vinai. But he says he feels happier in the United States.

"I like here better," he said. "Since I came here I found that life in the camp...it's peaceful, but there is no future. We just stay like a pig in the [cage] and wait for the food. That's it."

Yang said more educational opportunities are available in the United States. In Laos, he had to walk for days to get to a school; here in every town schools are abundant, and even in a relatively small town like Missoula, there is a university.

Soon after his arrival in Missoula, Yang attended and graduated from the Hellgate High School with the help of the English as a Second Language program there. In 1989 he studied microbiology at the University of Montana, using his background as a laboratory technician.

He took a break from pursuing his college education in 1990 to take on a full-time job as a bilingual tutor. Through his work he has not only helped Hmong children succeed academically in American schools but also taught them the importance of preserving the Hmong culture.

When he first came to the United States, he almost tried to forget his culture to assimilate into American society, he said. This happened to many Hmong whose transition process was so drastic and painful. Learning the English language was the hardest for many, and in the early years some thought of giving up the Hmong language, the foundation of their cultural identity.

But in recent years both the local people involved in resettlement of the Hmong and the refugees themselves came to realize that preserving their cultural heritage is crucial to the Hmong's survival.

Now Yang plays an important role in the effort to pass on Hmong traditions in the community. At age 31, he is one of the youngest Hmong in Missoula who are dedicated to this cause.

For years Yang has organized the Hmong New Year celebration in Missoula, in which children perform the traditional dances they have learned in the cultural class. The Hmong New Year, the only holiday the Hmong celebrate during the year, is the time for the whole Hmong community to celebrate the harvest, get rid of the bad things from the old year and bring blessings to the new year. In Missoula, it has also become an opportunity for the Hmong to share the celebration with the locals, and to see old friends and relatives.

From late 1992 to early 1993, Yang served as a co-curator of the Hmong cultural exhibit held at Missoula Museum of the Arts. For the exhibit, he built a model of the typical Hmong home, with the help of Hmong elders in town.

As the only Hmong in Missoula who knows many funeral verses played on the kheng, the Hmong mouth organ, Yang is also preserving precious traditions. These

funeral verses are believed to lead the soul of the dead to the land of ancestors. He learned in Laos how to play the Hmong drum, another important instrument in the funeral rituals.

Hmong traditions, including the language, music and dance, marriage ceremony, funeral rituals, spirituality and Hmong embroidery art, must be passed on to the younger generation because they have held on to them for more than 2,000 years, Yang said in a strong voice, and added: "We just can't forget it."

He admits it is an uphill challenge to teach children growing up in this society about Hmong traditions, many aspects of which are rapidly going out of usage. As Hmong children have become more and more Americanized, the gaps between their generation and those of their parents and grandparents have widened. The kids don't share the same values with older Hmong any more, and leave the elders at a loss and in isolation. "They (some of the young Hmong) want to give up everything," he said. "I think they don't really know who they are." A couple of families in town even opted to do away with the Hmong language completely, thinking it would make their assimilation easier, he said.

The Hmong might be facing the biggest challenge to their cultural identity now in their thousands of years of history, said Nancy Grasseschi, the director of the bilingual education program at the Hellgate High School. The Hmong managed to maintain their independence for centuries in China and Southeast Asia, because they were still close together, living in a relatively autonomous setting. But in the United States, families are forced to scatter and mix with others.

That is maybe another reason why the presence of a person like Yang, who can be a bridge between the young and the old, is so important. While sticking to his roots, he has tried and learned new things in this country. That is not to say that everything goes his way. Last December he applied to become a police officer, anticipating his five-year contract with the bilingual education office would expire this June. Before the test he told

me excitedly that the job with the Missoula Police Department would be stable, and would allow him to start getting trained right away without any waiting period. He was confident about his physical ability, but didn't pass the written test before he got to the physical exam. But he is not discouraged, and says he will try again, maybe next year. "All I need to do is to try again," he said.

That resilient attitude may be the key to the survival of Yang and his family. Along with Ia Vang, who works six days a week at a local Chinese food outlet as a cashier and waitress, Yang supports five children, two of whom were born in Missoula. He's hoping to bring his mother from Laos to Missoula, but it will take three years to do so.

It's too late to bring his father to Missoula. Mr. Yang died four years ago in Laos, after suffering many years from the effect of "yellow rain," deadly chemical spread by Pathet Lao soldiers using Soviet gunships. Yang said his father was exposed to the chemical when he worked as a nurse. After the war, Yang had seen his father as a healthy man except when he suffered a bout of sharp pain in the stomach about once every year. He learned the exact cause of the pain from his relatives only after the father's death. The news saddened him especially because he never got to see his father after leaving Laos.

When he visited Laos in December 1993, he couldn't go to the father's cemetery because the village where he was buried was off limits to non-communists.

All this sadness notwithstanding, things are looking "pretty good" now for Yang and his family. He says 1994 was a special year for him; he received his American citizenship on Dec. 1, and soon after, he got a notice that he had won the 1995 National bilingual Instructional Assistant of the Year award. He received the award Feb. 15 in Phoenix.

"My dream is coming true, so I'm very proud of it," Yang said.



Yang says he feels he could've finished some kind of college degree by now had he come to this country earlier. "I came too late," he said. "I'm a bit too old to learn everything."

He will no doubt prove himself wrong when he goes back to the University of Montana this fall to continue his study in microbiology.

## PART II: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE: THE MISSOULA HMONG COMMUNITY IN CONTEXT

Missoula's Hmong, currently numbering about 260, have survived the drastic transition from the jungles of Southeast Asia to mountains of Montana, and despite difficulties, they are making their way toward economic and educational success.

The 20-year-old Hmong connection to Missoula had a unique beginning. The most prominent Hmong and his relatives first settled in Missoula. Gen. Vang Pao was the leader of the CIA-financed Hmong army during the war in Southeast Asia. When the war was over in 1975, Vang Pao decided to move to the United States. Among other places, he picked western Montana. On the advice of a CIA friend who was a native of Missoula, the general bought a ranch-style home in the Target Range area of Missoula in October 1975 and several months later purchased a 400-acre farm near Corvallis. With him came about 60 Hmong, including Vang Pao's five wives and their children. Soon 500 to 100 Hmong were coming every month.

When Vang Pao and his followers arrived, Missoula wasn't ready for them. There had been little advance warning, and Missoulians knew very little about the Hmong. School and health officials were flabbergasted.

Pat DonTigny, public health nurse and refugee coordinator at the Missoula City-County Health Department, said when the first Hmong came, they "pretty much arrived with just clothes on their backs, no pictures, nothing else."

The department staff was shocked to find that the Hmong were ill-prepared to live in a modern society. Their lifestyle in Laos was that of peasant farmers, and they were not familiar with modern technology. That meant they had to learn everything from how to use hot water, washing machines, refrigerators, toilets or how to write checks to pay the bills.

“We have to remember that overwhelming things were hitting on them,” DonTigny said. “That group, when they first came, they had no education, no warning as to what it is really like over here.”

Many of these people had war injuries. Hearing problems, either of genetic nature or as a result of ear infections, were prevalent.

Older people had severe eye problems; they didn’t have glasses. There also were cases of ptergium, a growth of the white part of the eye caused by excessive exposure to the sun. Some needed surgery to save their sight, she said.

The Hmong’s war experience, coupled with the drastic change of environment, contributed to mental problems, such as delayed stress and depression, and those mental problems “still continue today,” she said.

Malnutrition and dental problems were frequent, too. In some instances, rotten teeth and gum infections spread to the whole body, causing life-threatening complications. But maybe the biggest health danger to the Hmong at the time was their attitude toward diseases, which was totally different from western views.

“They quite frequently felt that this was their luck,” she said. “It was either caused by bad spirit or ancestors were mad at them.”

In one instance, the department learned of a boy suffering from rotten teeth and gum infection. Officials urged surgery, but the family refused to have him treated. “Because of the severity of this, because of the potential life-threatening risk of this child, it had to be reported to the Department of Family Services, because in essence it was a (case of) medical neglect,” she said. The pressured family moved to California to avoid surgery, but they were tracked down. Eventually the boy was treated, she said.

DonTigny attributed the family’s stubbornness to its mistrust of the medical system in Laos. The Hmong often felt the Lao doctors were experimenting on them, she said.

The adjustment to American education was no less traumatic than the world of medicine. Missoula's schools didn't know how to react to the influx of Hmong refugees.

"They were coming from a very traumatic background," said Betsy Williams, the director of bilingual education program for the Missoula's School District #1. "We were in no way prepared to teach them or work with them."

Teachers were startled to have Hmong students who couldn't understand English at all and couldn't keep up with the class. In the early years there was no concept of bilingual education, and frustrated teachers suppressed the use of the Hmong language, telling the children to speak English at home. But that turned out to be bad advice. Hmong parents and children became unable to communicate at any level, threatening the very foundation of their culture.

"Those were the sins we committed," Williams said.

Compared with other refugees, the Hmong especially had a hard time in learning English because many didn't know how to write and read in their own language.

Toua Vang, a University of Montana junior in business management, said the schools in the early 1980s, when he went through the transition, were better equipped to handle refugee students than in the mid to late 1970s. But it was still not easy for him to assimilate into the American system. When he first entered an elementary school in 1980, he couldn't understand his teacher at all. He just sat through the day in the class, sometimes imitating what the student next to him was doing.

"Many times I was on the verge of tears, and sometimes to make through a regular day was an accomplishment and a half," recalled the 21-year-old Vang, who now speaks English without a trace of accent. "I knew very little English to begin with... . Speaking correctly became a challenge and simple class exercises turned into nightmares."

For three years, he spent half of his school time outside the classroom, getting help from English as a Second Language programs.

Vang said he feels fortunate because his transition occurred when he was 5 years old. The older the student was, the more hectic and frustrating the process was, he said.

And it wasn't just dealing with the language. Williams recalled an incident in the early 1980s that shows how the older students had been traumatized by the war. One day an Air Force plane roared overhead. The Hmong students began to hide under their desks. They thought the plane had come to bomb them.

Today, 20 years after the Hmong's arrival in Missoula, the picture is quite different. The population has stabilized in the last five to six years around 250 or 260, ending the unexpected influx of refugees. During the last year, only a few Hmong families moved to Missoula, officials said. The population peaked at 800 to 1,000 in 1980, but many left when prominent Hmong leaders such as Gen. Vang Pao and Moua Cha moved to California to seek better business opportunities and to help Hmong refugees in the area.

A lot of progress has been made; confusion died out as many refugees came to terms with technology and the Western lifestyle. Adjustment became easier for newly arrived Hmong because the established Hmong teach them how to survive. A Hmong translator hired by the local health department also works as mediator between doctors and the Hmong by arranging appointments with doctors and explaining medical terms to patients.

The locals have learned to adjust as well. Missoula's medical community has learned to become more patient, and to understand that Hmong's wishes and wants are often different from those of the mainstream culture. Workshops on cultural sensitivity have enhanced doctors' knowledge and understanding of patients' different values.

"You kind of let go a little bit and allow them to think for themselves as long as it's not a life-threatening situation," DonTigny said.

Schools now are better prepared to accommodate refugees. Under Williams' guidance, bilingual Hmong tutors have reinforced the refugees' identity, which had been

suppressed since their arrival. The Missoula program has proved successful. Bounthavy “Vee” Kiatoukaysy won the National Bilingual Instructional Assistant of the Year award in 1993, bringing national attention to the Missoula’s bilingual education program. And Tou Yang got the same award this year, which Williams says is a double compliment since it’s very unusual for the National Association for Bilingual Education to honor an instructor from the same city just two years later.

In a national perspective, Missoula’s Hmong community represents a fraction of the Hmong refugees who have migrated to the United States over the last two decades. The 170,000 Hmong, including 40,000 children born in the United States, have settled predominantly in California, but there also are significant communities on the East Coast, and in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Texas. About 70,000 Hmong live in California, mostly in the Central Valley. As a city, Fresno contains the largest Hmong population, with 35,000 people. A milder climate, more job opportunities, a more generous welfare system, and the presence of Hmong leaders and relatives are major factors that have attracted so many there.

Those large Hmong communities have developed cultural cocoons of their own. Ia Vang, the wife of Tou Yang, showed several Hmong movies — all made in the United States — in their Missoula apartment. There were some Chinese movies with Hmong captions, too. She said in communities in California, Wisconsin or Minnesota, Hmong video shops sell a variety of goods, explicitly designed for Hmong consumption. Because there is no such shop in Missoula, she usually asks her relatives in Wisconsin to send the movies, she said. In California, Ia saw a TV program in which the English news was translated into Hmong.

Ia took out one of the video tapes from a bookshelf in the living room. The cover of the video, a love story movie, read, “Kev Hlub Nyob Qhov Twg,” or “Where is the love?” On the cover a young Hmong man and woman were posing gracefully. The actor, based in Spokane, is also a director, singer and father of three, she explained. “He is

Tou's friend," she said. Tou got to know him through the Hmong volleyball tournament held annually in the Pacific Northwest.

Big cities like Fresno or Minneapolis offer other recreational and cultural opportunities, such as the annual New Year celebration party. Ia said many Hmong across the country visit Fresno every year to participate in the celebration, a popular place for the Hmong to socialize. It is also a place where young boys and girls look for spouses. One of the main events is a ball-throwing ritual, in which hundreds of boys and girls line up in traditional costumes to throw cloth balls back and forth all day long while singing love songs. People also join week-long festivities that include soccer tournament and beauty pageant. Even some Hmong who settled in Australia, Canada and France come to visit, Ia said.

Missoula Hmong hold their own New Year celebration every year in a local school gym. But the size and grandeur of Fresno or Minneapolis celebrations dwarf Missoula's, many Hmong say. The Missoula celebration lasts only a day, since many have jobs or must attend schools. Because there aren't enough youngsters, the ball-throwing ritual (using tennis balls instead of original cloth balls) is a formality, lasting only five minutes.

But now more people are feeling the downside of living in big cities, or near big cities, and appreciating the Arcadian environments of places like Missoula. Ia said she would like to stay in Missoula because here she doesn't have to worry about her kids getting involved in gangs, a growing concern among the Hmong parents elsewhere. Ia's uncle's son was recently shot to death in a fight in a Fresno motel. "Very tall and very handsome," she said about the 19-year-old boy. He and his wife were members of a gang.

In June 1994, Hmong everywhere were shocked by reports that two teenage Hmong were involved in the shooting of a retired German couple in a small suburban community near Los Angeles. The woman was killed and her husband badly wounded.

“Back in our country, you never saw things like this happen,” Nu Yeng, the father of one of the suspects, told the New York Times. “There are no thieves, although our houses are not as nice as here. Nothing would come into your house except for the animals you own.”

In big cities, parents have lost their control over children, and can't protect them from bad influences, Hmong parents in Missoula say. “It's better to live here,” Ia said. “Teenagers (in big cities) don't work hard at school.”

In recent years, the rising anti-immigrant sentiment in California, characterized by the passage of Proposition 187 last November, has worried not only immigrants but also government officials involved in refugee resettlement. Last October, a month before the passage of the sweeping proposition to outlaw the state's services to illegal immigrants, a newsletter for U.S. Committee for Refugees reported:

“... Those who worry that refugees could be affected by anti-immigrant sentiment note that groups like those supporting Proposition 187 may say that refugees on public assistance are costing California tax-payers too much, and argue for reductions in refugee admissions.”

Pao Fang, the director of Lao Family Community in Fresno, one of the Hmong self-support organizations in the country, said in a telephone interview that anti-immigrant feeling is a worry. But almost all the Hmong, except about the 1,000 who came from France, have legally entered the country as refugees. (Refugees are also different from immigrants in the sense that they didn't have a choice.) Asked what he thinks about some people who just group all immigrants, legal or illegal, and refugees as a burden to the state's taxpayers, he said, “But what can we do? we just try our best (to achieve self-sufficiency.)”

The California experience, highlighted by crime and anti-immigrant backlash, sounds just bad enough. Then why aren't more people moving to Missoula? The reason is simple: jobs. Missoula's Hmong live in various areas of the Missoula Valley, but about a



third of 40 families are clustered in the apartment complex on the 1900 block of the South Third West. Except for a few families who have established themselves financially, own two cars and live in four-bedroom houses, most are slowly working their way up the economic ladder, often relying on some kind of public assistance.

Mary Yang, a case manager at the Refugee Assistance Corp., said now 40 percent of the whole Hmong population in Missoula are employed in some way or another, but some of those still receive federal welfare benefits. Many of the remaining 60 percent, including the elders and children, are recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (SSI.) Recent arrivals from the camps or Laos are eligible for eight months of cash assistance.

Finding a satisfactory job is a big challenge for many refugees. Donna Emery, also a case manager at the Refugee Assistance Corp. in Missoula, said the current welfare system fosters dependency, both locally and nationally. Families with several children find they can receive more money through welfare than by working full-time, she said.

Even if they try to be self-sufficient, many Hmong workers in Missoula feel they are given dead-end jobs. Mary Yang, who has been helping the Hmong get jobs for many years, said many local employers discriminate against refugees, especially older ones, hiring them only as custodians, house cleaners or grocery store stockers. "They are unwilling to hire older people," she said. "Even people who speak English, they (employers) don't hire them."

Norjar Vang, 36, is one of those who are frustrated by the lack of opportunities. He has been looking for permanent employment since graduating from the University of Montana in May 1993 with a bachelor's degree in mathematics. He does have a heavy accent in his English, but one can understand what he says. He is well educated: he speaks French and has a Laotian degree in physics and math. He has frequented the university's Career Services for the last two years, but without success. To support four

children, ages between two months and seven, he has been working as a stocker at stores such as Tidyman's, Buttery, Shopko and Bi-Lo.

"I can't find a job in my field," Vang said sadly, adding he's not sure why. He said the reason may be his age, the quality of his English or discrimination.

"My first job, I worked at Tidyman's. I got paid \$5 (per hour.) It's not good, but I have to do it."

Despite the harsh conditions, Norjar Vang said he can't go back to Laos because it's a communist country. And for the future of his kids, he said he will stay in the United States. He is determined to send all of his children through college, and perhaps even through graduate school.

"I will fight many many ways to support (the children)," he said.

During the interview, he repeatedly apologized for his English and his pronunciation. Before he left, he apologized for his language again, then put his hands together in front of the chest, in the sign of respect.

All in all, the Hmong in Missoula are survivors, officials say. In Missoula, there is no, or at least no visible, anti-immigrant sentiment. Instead of isolating themselves in a commune-like setting, the Hmong have interacted with the local community. Also, the Hmong have become known to the locals over the years by selling vegetables in Missoula's Farmer's Market, an outdoor produce market held every Saturday morning during summer and fall. The number of the Hmong participating in the market has increased steadily every year. There Hmong, from children to grandmothers, sell vegetables, varying from onions to potatoes to carrots, next to the stands of local bakeries and flower vendors.

The Hmong in Missoula have interacted out of necessity. Because of the relatively small size of the community, they have kept in touch with local officials, DonTigny said. When Chue Vang, a Hmong translator who works for the health department, goes to other parts of the country to see relatives or have a conference with other Hmong leaders,

people in other cities say: “How do you know so much? You are so smart.” or “I don’t believe you,” DonTigny said, laughing.

Missoula’s Hmong have long had the close-knit feeling among themselves, too, said Toua Vang, a son of Chue Vang. All Hmong now fear losing the closeness they have shared through decades of hard times. Right now there is still a sense of family and solidarity among Missoula’s Hmong, he said, adding every Hmong knows each other and “everyone is related in the end.” But tomorrow, that kind of unity might melt away as younger people move out of town in search of better jobs. That is actually happening to the three or four Hmong who graduate from the University of Montana every year. Toua himself feels he will probably move to a bigger city after graduation to get a professional job. But the extended family would stay together, with the children becoming “the magnet” of the parents, he said.

The 2,000-year-old tradition of the Hmong stands at a crossroads. But that’s nothing new to the Hmong, who have faced and withstood many difficult transitions in their long history. Their challenge now, as it has been at previous moments, is to adjust to a new culture, while holding on to values and traditions of the old one.

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