

**New Mountain, New River, New Home?  
The Tasmanian Hmong**

**by**

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of Master of Arts**

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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief, no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

Margaret Eldridge

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## **Abstract.**

### **New Mountain, New River, New Home?. The Tasmanian Hmong.**

This study examines the first group of largely preliterate refugees resettled in Tasmania after the 1975 Communist takeover of Laos. Hill tribe people, the Tasmanian Hmong left Laos and spent years in Thai refugee camps. This thesis examines the possible reasons for their secondary migration to various locations in Queensland. Their departure from Tasmania raised questions about why this apparently well-settled community left the island. For example, many people assumed it was because of Tasmania's cool climate.

The thesis creates a context in which to examine the Hmong's motivation to leave the island state, with reference to theories of migration, diaspora and globalisation. Oral histories draw out the stories of individual Hmong, their involvement in the Secret War in Indo-China, the escape from Laos, life in Thai refugee camps, their resettlement in Tasmania and subsequent departure for Queensland. Hmong informants include those remaining in Tasmania, those who left for Queensland and those who later returned to Tasmania. These interviews are balanced with voices of professionals and volunteers involved in settlement of the Hmong. Participant observation and itinerant ethnography have been employed, making use of everyday opportunities to collect information from which to develop ideas and to explain the secondary migration of the Hmong. This 'history from below', places value on the stories of ordinary people as a valuable resource.

The research concludes that, in addition to the desire to create a mega-community of Hmong in Queensland — in an attempt to counter loss of tradition and culture, and build Hmong cohesiveness — secondary migration was influenced by a desire for family reunification and a strong economic motive. It demonstrates that secondary migration is typical of many refugee communities.

In particular, the secondary migrations observed in diasporic Hmong communities have parallels with migrations of Hmong from China and with traditional movements in Laos, where swidden agriculture requires establishment of new villages when depleted soil or sickness affects settlements.

The research is important because there has been little recorded about the Hmong community in Tasmania, nor about other Australian Hmong communities. Since the once vibrant Hobart community is now a remnant population, it is important to place on record its story as part of recent social history. In examining a refugee community such as the Hmong, this thesis offers an investigation of the circumstances of becoming refugees, an analysis of settlement experiences and an exploration into the context and reasons for secondary migration. In addition, it provides an entry into comparative research on other refugee communities, which has relevance for those who work with refugees and are interested in their demographics.

## **Acknowledgements**

This thesis could not have been written without the support and friendship of many of my former students, the Tasmanian Hmong. They have trusted me with their stories, shared their lives with me and welcomed me to their homes to visit and stay. Especially I thank Vue and Chue Thaow and their family, whose friendship I value, for assisting me in many ways. Vue gave me the authority to place the story of his community on record. I also acknowledge my first Hmong student, Cher Pao Thaow, who alerted me to the traumas his people had experienced, shared his story, and reminisced with me again as he was dying.

I have had great support and valuable advice from my initial supervisor Dr Alison Alexander and from Dr Kate Brittlebank, my subsequent supervisor, who, with wise counsel and academic rigour, has helped me see this project through. Dr Roberta Julian, my associate supervisor, has been a great encourager and sharer of things Hmong, both before and during the writing of this thesis. I have valued the support of the School of History and Classics at the University of Tasmania and in particular have benefited from the advice of Dr Pam Sharpe and Dr Stefan Petrow. I have appreciated the stimulation of seminars and workshops with other post-graduates both in the School of History and Classics and in other areas. The University of Tasmania is to be commended for giving opportunities to research students, no matter how white-haired or long in the tooth!

I am fortunate to have spent time in Laos which has enabled me to better understand the Hmong. I have appreciated the contact with Hmong in Laos, especially Dr Chu Vang, for whom I worked at Mahosot Hospital in Vientiane, and who took me to meet Hmong at KM 52 village. I am very grateful to Viraphone Viravong and employees at Electricité du Laos, who, amongst many other good things, enabled me to visit Hmong villages while a volunteer teacher in Laos, and to Khoune Souphanh who, despite everything, was determined to get me there.

I thank Prof Ghassan Hage and Prof Geoffrey Blainey who kindly responded to my requests to verify the ideas they expressed at conferences of the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies in 2004 and 2007. There have been others, part of a wide network including all those individuals who agreed to be interviewed and who have helped me in my quest to ensure that the story of the Hmong community of Tasmania is on record. To all those other ‘voices’ in this thesis and others whom I have consulted, including staff of the Immigration Department, I offer my sincere thanks for their assistance and interest.

My grateful thanks go to Dr Glyn Roberts for valuable expertise and assistance with the maps. In addition, I thank those friends who read the manuscript and made helpful comments; Drs Chris and Gary Easthope, Michael Patterson, Val Cooke, Tong Her and Sandra Thaow, and Elizabeth Wilson who kindly proof-read the thesis. My dear friend Dr Kate McPherson, with whom I had many discussions about approaches to thesis writing and who offered much initial encouragement, sadly did not live to see its completion. I also owe an enormous debt to several patient individuals who helped me overcome my lack of computer skills. To those who never gave up on me and may have thought I never would learn, especially Vongvilay Khonpathoum, just look at me now! Finally I thank my family and friends for putting up with my preoccupation with this task and for their understanding. This thesis is a testament to their friendship, love and forbearance.

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## **Acronyms**

AMES, Adult Migrant Education Service, later Adult Migrant English Service

CIA, Central Intelligence Agency

CRSS, Community Refugee Settlement Scheme

CRS, Community Refugee Support

DIAC, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, referred to as the Dept of Immigration

DEIRT, Department of Employment, Industrial Relations and Training

ESL, English as a Second Language

HAA, Hmong Australia Association

HSC, Higher Schools Certificate.

IMPACT, Independent Migrant Program of Active Community Tasks

LEI, Local Enterprise Initiative

MRC, Migrant Resource Centre

NAATI, National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters.

NIC, Network for Intercultural Communication

RPA, Romanized Popular Alphabet

SPK, 'Helping each other' housing assistance group

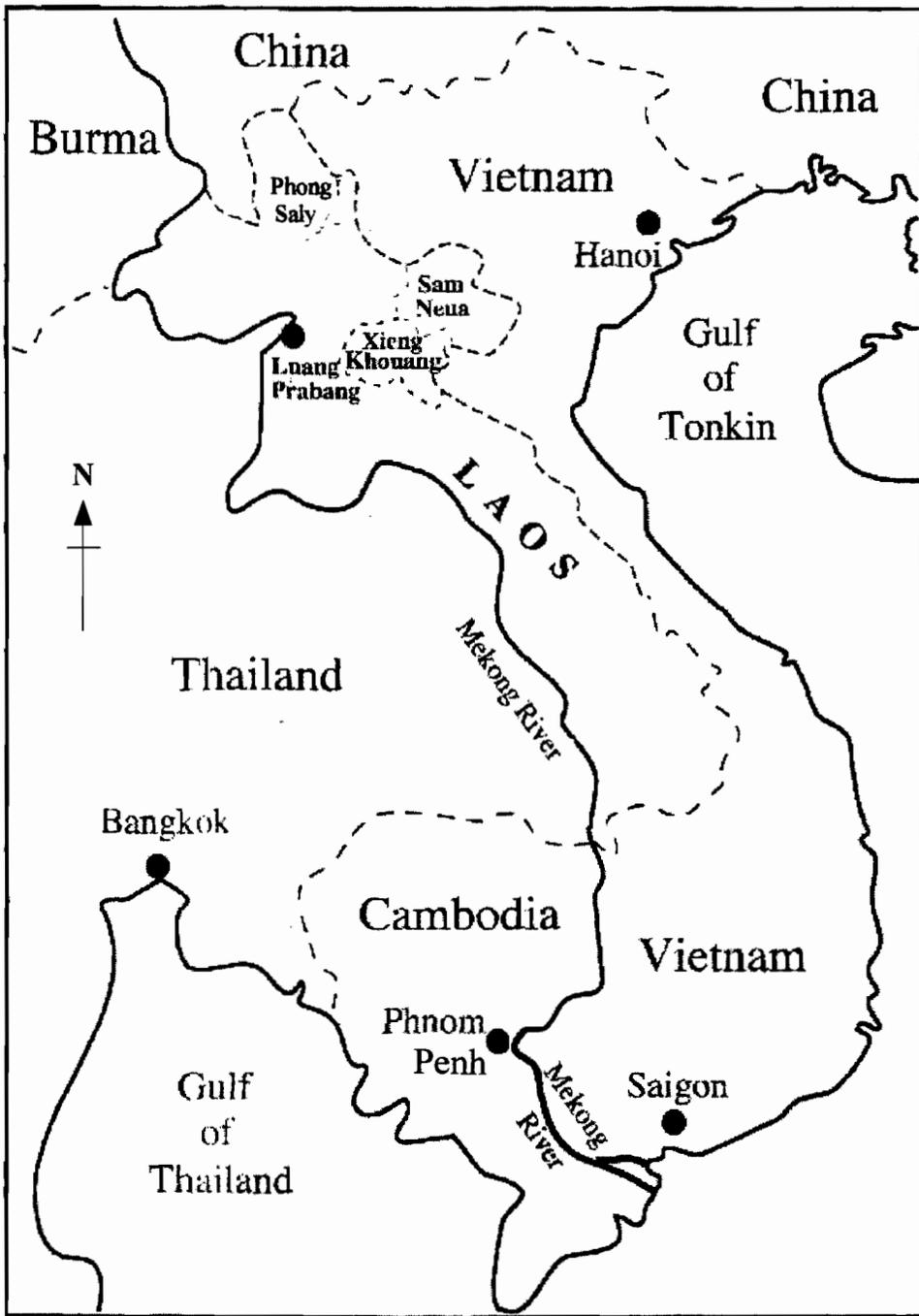
TAFE, Technical and Further Education

TASame, Tasmanian Association for Multicultural Education

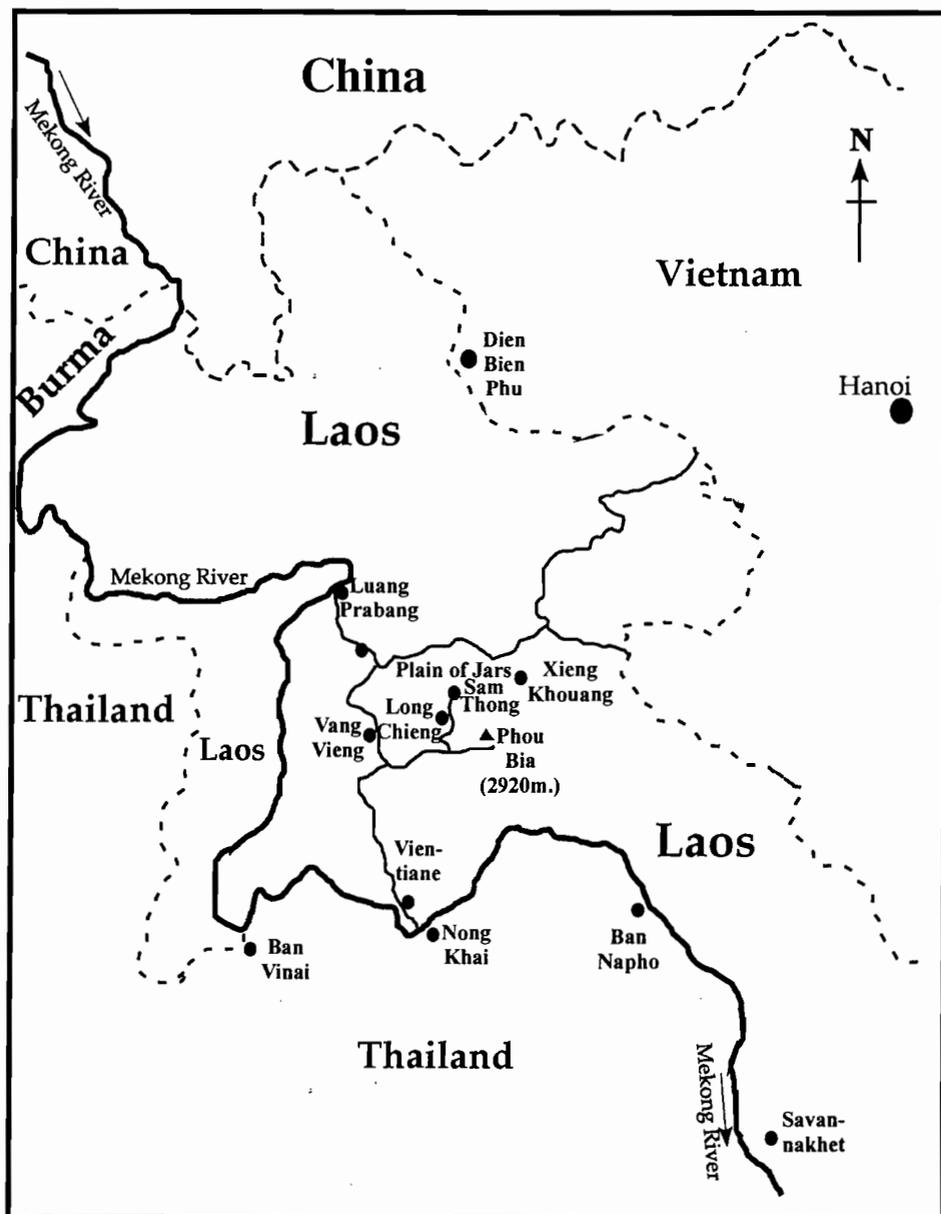
TASSAB, Tasmanian Schools Assessment Board

TESOL, Teaching English as a Second or Other Language

TIS, Telephone Interpreter Service, later Telephone and Interpreting Service



Laos and its neighbours



Northern Laos

## Introduction

Many tourists to the Australian island state of Tasmania travel the Midlands Highway, which links Launceston in the north with Hobart in the south. They often stop to explore the small towns which are now mostly by-passed by the highway. One of these towns is Pontville, about 20 kilometres from Hobart, and the Catholic Church of St Matthew is visited by locals and tourists alike. A stroll around the graveyard reveals a testament to the waves of immigrants who have made Tasmania their home: Anglo-Saxons, Greeks, Poles, Italians and others. There are one or two surprises which would confound most people. Two gravestones have an unfamiliar script, making these graves quite different from the others and instead of floral tributes it is more likely that there will be an offering of fruit on the grave. At Bushy Park in the Derwent Valley, browsing around the cemetery, visitors will find seven more gravestones of a similar type. Whilst they may not realise it, the answer to this puzzle can be found at Hobart's Salamanca Market, one of the most popular destinations for visitors to Tasmania. One area of the market is devoted to vegetables and the vendors are clearly immigrants from Asia. Their vegetables are very popular with locals who appreciate the quality and variety and the fact that most are organically grown, if not organically registered. Often confused with Vietnamese or Chinese, these market gardeners and purveyors of beautifully fresh, clean vegetables are the Hmong. It is their gravestones as well as their presence at Salamanca Market which mark the existence of a Hmong community in Tasmania.

The Hmong are an animistic hill-tribe people, some of whom live in northern Laos, and this thesis looks at those Lao Hmong who came to Hobart, mostly from refugee camps in Thailand, between 1973 and 1994. It examines their settlement in Tasmania following their traumatic experiences in Laos, as a result of the Indo-Chinese war, and their escape to refugee camps in Thailand.

Originally I intended to write an oral history of the community, following their life stories and resettlement in Tasmania, because of a concern that the history of the community was not on record. However it became clear that the question of greatest interest was why an apparently well-established community, of over six hundred Hmong in total, became a remnant population of just a few

families, as a result of secondary migration to Queensland. The original plan was modified to accommodate both this core question and the subsidiary questions of whether there were modifications in policy and practice, in government departments and other places, in order to support the Hmong appropriately and whether that support was adequate. The Hmong voices have been retained to ensure that the story of the Hmong community of Tasmania was told authentically.

Many of the Hmong found employment in Tasmania, educational opportunities were available, a variety of official and voluntary support was available, the local population was reasonably supportive, a number of the Hmong became homeowners, some owned land and most took out Australian citizenship. What motivated such a community to leave for Queensland? Many Tasmanians assumed that it was because the Hmong preferred the sub-tropical climate in Queensland. Was this a correct assumption? To answer this question it is important to examine the community, its history and its life in Tasmania, and from this to seek an explanation for the secondary migration to Queensland which decimated the Tasmanian Hmong community over a period of a few years. Attention to the settlement assistance offered, and the opportunities for interaction with the host society, are examined in the search for reasons for the departure of the majority of the Tasmanian Hmong. Theories of migration, diaspora and globalisation are examined to see if the secondary migration can be understood in terms of these theoretical areas. Reference is made to other diasporic Hmong communities to see if they exhibit similar behaviours of relocation, throwing light on the question posed. The desire of the newly settled Hmong in Tasmania, to become economically viable by establishing a communal market garden, resulted in disappointment and the thesis looks at whether this was of importance in relation to the secondary migration. The secondary migration itself is examined, with the conclusion offering possible reasons for the relocation of the majority of the Hmong to different parts of Queensland.

Scholars have offered a variety of reasons for migration and secondary migration and some of these have relevance to the Tasmanian Hmong. In terms of migration theory, it appears that secondary migration is not unusual. Brah, Van

Hear and Cohen's works on diaspora offer many examples of diasporic communities which have continued to relocate after initial resettlement.<sup>1</sup> More specifically in relation to movements of the Hmong, Quincy describes the very early migrations of the Hmong in China, positing the theory that they originated in Siberia and predate the Chinese in China.<sup>2</sup> Cooper explains the traditional movement of village communities in Laos as the Hmong searched for viable land to practise slash and burn agriculture.<sup>3</sup> In addition to migrations from China into Indo-China and more local movements within Laos, writers consider secondary migration in countries of resettlement. Thao compares movement of the diasporic Hmong in the United States with the traditional moving patterns in Laos and considers they are parallel behaviours albeit in different environments.<sup>4</sup> Desbarats describes the secondary movements of Indo-Chinese in America, where the motivation is mainly economic and family related.<sup>5</sup> Lee considers secondary migration in Australia as crucial to cultural survival and Tapp discusses fictive kinship where Hmong share nothing but clan name, in the globalisation of the Hmong which has followed diasporic resettlement.<sup>6</sup> Downman believes the move to Queensland was orchestrated by Hmong leaders to create a viable Hmong presence and critical mass to deal with issues of tokenism, cultural complacency and assimilation and 'was conducted as an attempt to link all facets of Hmongness.'<sup>7</sup> All these writers influenced this thesis, which attempts to explain the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong to Queensland.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities*, London, 1996, p.182, N. Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*, Seattle, 1998, and R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas. An Introduction*, Abingdon, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> K. Quincy, *Hmong. History of a People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cheney, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> R.Cooper, *The Hmong*, Bangkok, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> C. Thao, 'Hmong Migration and Leadership in Laos and in the United States', in Downing, T. and Olney, D., eds, *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports*. Washington, D. C., 1982.

<sup>5</sup> J. Desbarats, 'Indochinese Resettlement in the United States', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75, 4, December, 1985, pp. 522-538.

<sup>6</sup> N. Tapp, 'Hmong Diaspora in Australia' in Tapp, N., and Lee, G., eds, *The Hmong of Australia. Culture and Diaspora*, Canberra, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> S. Downman, 'Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong in Australia and Thailand', unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 2004, p. 199.

### **Primary Sources**

The primary sources utilised in this thesis are interviews conducted with those Hmong who were part of the secondary migration to Innisfail, Cairns and Brisbane, with those who remained in Hobart, and with those who left for Queensland but have since returned to Tasmania. These interviews suggest reasons for the relocation to Queensland. In addition, interviews with those who had responsibility for settling the Hmong in Hobart, both professionals and volunteers, indicate the amount of support that was available. These other interviews also highlight the difficulties which occurred in the settlement process, partly as a result of dealing with a pre-literate community. In addition they shed light on the changes of policy and practice which were needed in order to accommodate the Hmong. These two issues of settlement support and changes of policy and practice have possible relevance to explanations for the secondary migration from Tasmania to Queensland.

### **Secondary Sources**

Underpinning the thesis is the body of literature which looks at theories of migration, diaspora and globalisation and offers some possible answers to the core question of the thesis. Other secondary sources utilised cover the range of scholarship on the Hmong and other migrant groups, including books, articles, theses, academic papers and conference papers. In addition other secondary sources such as newspaper articles have been used to support the arguments presented.

### **Rationale**

The reasons for the secondary migration need to be examined in light of the fact that Tasmania is now settling even larger numbers of refugees than at the time of Hmong arrivals, and there may be demographic and other transferable lessons to be drawn from the settlement of the Hmong. In addition the Hmong have an interesting story to tell, including the reasons for their becoming refugees, their life in the refugee camps of Thailand, their settlement in Tasmania and their secondary migration. In the context of post-World War II migration to Tasmania,

they were the first mainly pre-literate group to arrive under family reunion and then as refugees and, along with the Vietnamese, the first sizeable group of non-European immigrants among Tasmania's almost entirely European inhabitants. There is little detailed published work about their community in Tasmania and a similar situation exists in relation to the Tasmanian Vietnamese community. Slowly the 'corporate memory' is being lost and many of those who worked with the Hmong have moved on. At the time of the arrival of the Hmong, organisations and government departments had to make adjustments to their procedures in order to accommodate this new ethnic group, and this has implications for other new communities. It is therefore important to set this recent social history on record before the community dissipates and is forgotten, and to document its presence in and its effect on Tasmania. The Hmong have left a legacy in Australia's island state through the introduction of vegetables previously unavailable and, in some cases, unknown in Tasmania, as well as the high standard of fresh, clean, organic produce. Even now, those few Hmong who remain continue to sell superb produce, offering a visible sign of Tasmania's multiculturalism at Salamanca Market and a reminder of an earlier vigorous community.

## **Method**

This thesis is based on the belief that detailed individual stories can add to a clearer understanding of the refugee experience and that demographic facts and figures, even where available, do not adequately explain history. Dianne Snowden suggests that in writing 'history from below' or micro-history, factors hitherto unobserved may be revealed. She adds that although this practice is often criticised for its readiness to shed a quantitative approach, personal accounts can contribute to historical understanding.<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Blainey commented recently 'When I studied history at university I had not been informed that ordinary people

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<sup>8</sup> D. Snowden, 'White Rag Burning: Irish women who committed arson in order to be transported to Van Diemen's Land', PhD Thesis, University of Tasmania, 2005, p. 17.

could be precious sources.’<sup>9</sup> The Hmong interviewed for this thesis, are, in my opinion, some of those precious sources, in particular because they have long relied solely on oral practice to relate their story. Attitudes such as these guided my initial decision to make this study an oral history. I also felt strongly that while much history can only be examined from written sources, I had the opportunity to write from oral sources, from people for whom oral history has been a necessity in the absence of written texts prior to 1953.

Hansen notes that qualitative researchers ‘recognise that they are an integral part of the research process. Their skills, attributes, personal characteristics, interests and views will to some degree impact on the data collected.’<sup>10</sup> I like to think that this thesis has that personal mark on it as a result of my involvement. Hansen continues: ‘It is also common in qualitative research for the researcher to adopt a participatory, collaborative role’.<sup>11</sup> The qualitative approach has been used here in order to ensure individual voices colour the thesis, and a participatory, collaborative role has been very much part of the method. As a qualitative researcher, I have attempted to ‘study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them.’<sup>12</sup> Louisa Schein refers to her study of the Hmong (in China called the Miao) as participant observation, a form of qualitative research, and a development of that which she calls ‘itinerant ethnography’.<sup>13</sup> She describes this as ‘moving from conventional ethnography to valuing such things as shopping, incidental conversations on trains and buses, the stares my fieldworker mode

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<sup>9</sup> G. Blainey, ‘Tasmania! Tasmania!’, paper presented at the Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies Conference, 20 October, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> E. Hansen, *Successful Qualitative Health Research. A practical introduction*, St Leonards, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. 1994, cited at a qualitative research workshop and in handouts offered by Dr. Delwyn Goodrick, 8 June, 2007, at the University of Tasmania.

<sup>13</sup> L. Schein, *Minority Rules. The Miao and the Feminine in China’s Cultural Politics*, London, 2000, p. 28.

elicited!'.<sup>14</sup> This emphasis resonated with my approach to this thesis and my involvement with the Tasmanian Hmong community, which has had elements of both participation and itinerancy.

### **Personal involvement with the Hmong**

In my long-term relationship with the Hmong, and when interviewing them for this study, I have been part of their families and community, included in their activities and welcomed into their homes. In terms of itinerancy, I have observed the Hmong wherever I have encountered them: in their homes, during journeys in their vehicles, around the meal table, at work, on their farms, at the markets selling their produce, at celebrations, in the classroom, in hospital in sickness, at births and in death. Therefore I declare my own long involvement at the outset. I have been closely associated with the Hmong for over thirty years, at times intimately, and am privileged to have their trust.

My contact with the Hmong began when I met Vue Thaow, subsequently the leader of the Hobart Hmong community, when he arrived in Hobart in 1973 as a Colombo Plan student. I was co-ordinator of the Host Family Scheme which offered international students friendship with local families. I met him in that capacity and I have maintained contact with him ever since. In 1980 I commenced employment as an English as a Second Language teacher at the Adult Migrant Education Service (AMES, later changed to Adult Migrant English Service and referred to as such throughout this thesis). Amongst my first students was a Hmong man with whom I felt a particular rapport, as he had been a teacher in Laos. We had many conversations and among other things he talked about his life in Laos, the difficulties brought about by the war, the family's escape to Thailand and life in the refugee camp. It was a story of tragedy and trauma, including the loss of his first baby in the refugee camp in Thailand. Years later I sat with him when he was terminally ill and shared more reminiscences. As more Hmong

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

arrived, I heard more tragic stories, and some of these were written as free writing exercises at the Adult Migrant English Service classes, often when the storytellers' English levels had improved sufficiently to allow them to place their stories on record. These stories were collated by Diana Levett and printed internally by AMES for access by the organisation throughout Australia. Realising that few Tasmanians had heard of the Hmong and had little idea of their circumstances, the writers were anxious to inform people of their past.<sup>15</sup>

Along with Diana Levett, I became a specialist in teaching pre-literate Hmong, and worked with a large percentage of the adult Hmong refugees, designing and developing appropriate learning materials for them, as few existed for pre-literate learners. I also co-ordinated an innovative course to train Hmong community interpreters, a category created especially for the Hmong because, although few had the educational level to be recognised by the National Accreditation Authority for Translating and Interpreting (NAATI), there was a great need for interpreters. In addition to teaching, I presented cultural awareness programs at the Royal Hobart Hospital, and other government departments, in order to increase understanding of the Hmong and their cultural needs. Initially this was done on a voluntary basis, out of concern for the welfare of my students and issues of access and equity, but eventually I was contracted by the departments concerned.

I was employed by the Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) to teach the use of electric sewing machines to Hmong men and women and assisted in the collection and presentation of an exhibition of their craft work at the MRC Moonah, a northern Hobart suburb near the homes of most of the Hmong. I worked for the Distance Education Program teaching Grade 10 Hmong girls who were well-advanced in pregnancy and unable to attend school. As a volunteer in the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme, I was involved in settlement of several Hmong families and continued the relationship with them long after the agreed

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<sup>15</sup> D. Levett, ed., *Stories from the Hmong*, Hobart, 1988.

settlement period of six months. I interviewed some of these families for this study. I also acted as a voluntary home tutor for a Hmong woman and her parents-in-law and, also in a voluntary capacity, I set up a free English class for older Hmong men who had used up the statutory hours for classes at AMES, but had not mastered survival English. As a result of this varied involvement with the Hmong, I have been recognised as an advocate and friend.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Laos connection**

In addition to being very familiar with the Hmong community of Tasmania, I also have the advantage of having lived in Laos where I was able to observe the Hmong who still live there. In 1996, with an interpreter, I visited a Hmong village near Luang Prabang in Northern Laos. I also met Hmong at the market there and noted how similar their presentation of vegetables was to the Hmong displays at Salamanca Market in Hobart. I flew to Xieng Khouang Province and the Plain of Jars and visited another Hmong village with an interpreter. By chance, I met there a relative of the Hmong leader in Hobart and it was brought home to me the connection that the same clan name represents to the Hmong. In 2002, on my retirement, I went to Laos for six months to work for Electricité du Laos as a volunteer English teacher. During that time, I also worked at the major hospital in Vientiane, teaching English to staff of the cardiology department. The department head is a Hmong for whom I had been English language tutor when he did his PhD in Hobart a few years previously. With him I was able to visit Ban KM 52, a Hmong resettlement village, where I met close relatives of Hobart Hmong I had taught. At the School for the Physically Disabled at Sikeud near Vientiane, where I taught English once a week, I met and chatted with Hmong students. I observed the Hmong at the morning market in Vientiane, and at the roadside selling traditional medicines and herbs in both places and, in marked contrast, also saw the extremely popular carrels where sophisticated

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<sup>16</sup> Vue Thaow, personal communication, 28 November, 1989.

computer links, organised by Hmong entrepreneurs, enabled the Hmong to talk with relatives overseas.

In 2003 and 2004, I spent periods of three months teaching English, again for Electricité du Laos, but this time in Luang Prabang in Northern Laos, an area where many of the Lao Hmong live. I visited the Hmong village I had first visited seven years earlier and was remembered by the village head as ‘the lady who came a long time ago and took lots of photos’! I chatted to Hmong women each evening at the night market in Luang Prabang and, at their invitation, visited their village to celebrate the Hmong New Year. I rewrote a bilingual story I had written for my AMES Hmong students, ‘The Hmong Year’, which was illustrated using computer graphics by three young Hmong at a self-access English Language Centre in Luang Prabang, where the book and other stories I wrote for the Centre’s educational purposes, are in regular use. I was driven to Xieng Khouang Province, a seven-hour journey from Luang Prabang as opposed to the one-hour flight I had made there from Vientiane in 1996. This enabled me to see and marvel at the terrain the Hmong had traversed when leaving the province to escape to Thailand. I also travelled around the province and saw countryside familiar to many of the Tasmanian Hmong.

### **The interviews**

I believe my broad involvement with the Hmong, and the associated knowledge gained from the many facets of that experience, provide a unique and valuable resource and offer access to information and interaction which might not otherwise be readily available to others, both in regard to the Hmong and the network of people who worked with them. Some years ago I suggested that the Hmong write down their story. There are records of other migrant communities which have made their home in Tasmania, some written by members of those

communities.<sup>17</sup> However, the Hmong referred the idea back to me and said they felt it would be better if their story was written by an outsider, someone other than a Hmong. They suggested that I do it, and when I eventually acquiesced, gave their formal permission, and offered to help in any way they could. The Hmong do not always respond positively to people asking them questions and can be very wary of researchers and journalists. A young Hmong woman in Cairns said the Hmong there had been approached by a journalist who wanted to write about them. They had refused as they did not know her and were unsure if they could trust her to tell the truth.<sup>18</sup> The young woman, whose parents and older relatives I had taught in Hobart, added that they had no problems in talking to me because they had known and trusted me for a long time. From the outset I told them that I wanted to record their stories and they were happy to share them with me. The procedures required by the Human Ethics Committee (Tasmania) Network, have been followed throughout. All of those directly quoted in the thesis were given the opportunity to view their quotations and to confirm that they were happy with them. This ‘member check’ is recommended as a procedure for qualitative research.<sup>19</sup> One or two Tasmanians requested that changes be made in the actual wording, for example, ‘kids’ be reworded as ‘children’. Some after due consideration, felt they had ‘perhaps been too political’ when interviewed and asked that some items be removed completely or reworded.

In Queensland, in August 2005, while staying with Hmong families in Brisbane, Cairns and Innisfail, I had conversations with them and others, mainly in the homes of the informants, but also at their farms, while travelling with them, and in the *Sib Pab Koom* (SPK) Housing Group Ltd. office in Cairns.<sup>20</sup> Three

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<sup>17</sup> See for example, R. Julian, ‘The Dutch in Tasmania: an exploration of ethnicity and immigrant adaptation’, PhD Thesis, University of Tasmania, 1990, and J. Pakulski, *Polish Migrants in Hobart: a study of community formation*, Hobart, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Young Hmong woman, F13, interviewed Brisbane, 16 August, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Hansen, *Successful Qualitative Health Research*, p. 56.

<sup>20</sup> *Sib Pab Koom* can be translated as ‘helping each other’. The group receives government funding to provide housing support for Hmong and other migrant groups. In addition it offers other support services and provides a meeting place for the Hmong of Cairns and Innisfail.

members of the Hmong community acted as facilitators and set up interviews where possible. Other interviews emerged through contact with my former students. Interviews were conducted in English in most cases but, in the others, family members acted as interpreters, translating questions and answers and explaining the ethics information, as required by the Ethics Committee. In some cases those who interpreted had never before heard the stories told by those being interviewed and this created a great deal of excitement and emotion. All the former Tasmanian Hmong who were asked to be interviewed were happy to answer questions and, in some cases, had particular stories they wished to tell. There was little interest in explanations of the research in most cases, but there was great interest in the fact that I had travelled to Queensland to visit the former Tasmanian Hmong. Everyone involved wanted to talk over 'the old days' in Hobart and had questions about the city, their teachers, sponsors and friends. Only one person I met by chance refused to give permission for information to be used and he was not one of the Hobart Hmong. I interpreted this to mean that he did not, at that stage, know me well and I had not earned his trust. Whilst anonymity was assured, this was not an issue for the Hmong and all said they had no problem with the use of their names. However, names have not been used, in order to safeguard personal details and as a courtesy where intimate matters emerged. In one or two cases when political issues were discussed, I have also refrained from using identifying codes. Not all those who were interviewed are included in the study, mainly because stories were similar, but their contributions were nevertheless valuable.

In most cases it was not possible to interview Hmong as individuals, which was to have been expected, considering their culture. Because of the difficulties with background noise and other forms of interference, audio-recording of the interviews proved impossible. It is possible that, had I persisted with a tape recorder, I may not have had the relaxed, informative conversations with the Hmong that were essential to my thesis. Detailed notes were handwritten at the time of interview and additional comments were written up the same evening. The

interviews of those other than Hmong, were conducted in offices and private homes, with people with whom I had a professional relationship of one sort or another. In one or two instances, they were contacts suggested by others. The same interview techniques were used, with some generic questions and some questions tailored to the interviewee.

### **Other sources**

In 1989, when I described an innovative course to train Hmong community interpreters, as part of a Graduate Diploma in Educational Studies (TESOL), there was great difficulty in finding published material on the Hmong.<sup>21</sup> Two reference books on the Hmong in America were available but there was nothing on the Australian Hmong.<sup>22</sup> I worked mostly from unpublished sources although there were broadsheets printed by the Immigration Department, with background information designed to help those settling the Hmong. Whilst there are considerably more resources now available, it has proved impossible to find any policy documentation from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), which would seem an obvious place to start searching for such material. The librarian informed me that there had been a huge cull of the library in 2003.<sup>23</sup> Several senior staff in Canberra were helpful, but could find no official documents recording the presence of Hmong in Australia.<sup>24</sup> In addition they said that the Hmong were never considered anything other than Lao. My memory suggests otherwise but I have no documentation to prove it. I only know that special arrangements were made for Hmong at different times and Hmong-specific funding was available to the Adult Migrant English Service and within the

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<sup>21</sup> M. Eldridge, 'Adult Migrant Education Intensive Course for Hmong', unpublished Education Project, Graduate Diploma of Educational Studies (TESOL), 1989. Part of this was subsequently published as K. McIntyre and M. Assenbruck, eds., *Hmong, Sikh and Filipino Cultures. Their Educational Implications*, Brisbane, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> T. Downing and D. Olney, eds, *The Hmong in the West. Observations and Reports*. Washington D.C., 1982 and G. Hendricks, B. Downing and A. Deinard, eds, *The Hmong in Transition*, New York, 1986.

<sup>23</sup> Telephone conversation with DIAC librarian, 20 September, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Telephone conversation with senior Immigration Department official, May, 2007.

Immigration Department. There are no staff remaining at the Department who worked with the Hmong. However, efforts to track former employees yielded one who worked for the Australian Embassy in Bangkok in the 1980s, but he did not interview Hmong for resettlement in Australia. My belief that the Hmong were treated as a separate group, however, was borne out in discussion with this person, who referred to official acknowledgement of their different ethnicity.<sup>25</sup> The former Regional Director of Immigration in Bangkok from 1987-1989 said that it did not surprise him that no published policy documents were available which specifically referred to the Hmong. Many of the decisions regarding them were what he called 'oral policy' meaning they were based on phone calls from Canberra. It was a case of 'policy on the run' and often on an ad hoc basis.<sup>26</sup>

The officials in Canberra with whom I talked said that most records have been destroyed and information on the Indo-Chinese was 'very patchy indeed'.<sup>27</sup> One referred to the possibility that there might be some background briefing documents, which are mentioned above and which I had previously accessed. My interest was in policy documents relating to Hmong resettlement, but I have been unable to track down anything of that nature and it now seems they may never have existed. In Hobart, after a thorough search by an Immigration staff member anxious to be of assistance, only one file emerged and it recorded the fact that the Hmong had their own Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS) group, but contained nothing of policy issues. Nothing has been handed on to the National Archives, although it is now more than thirty years since the first Hmong refugees arrived, and files on Indo-Chinese refugees, housed in the archives, only produced documents such as multiple copies of reports on small education projects and some photographic records which were not relevant to this study. Once the Hmong had settled in Tasmania, subsequent moves were of no interest to the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with former Immigration Department official, 7 August, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Telephone interview with Gervais Appave, former Regional Director of Immigration, Bangkok, 17 October, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Telephone conversation with long-serving Hobart staff member of the Immigration Department, June, 2007.

Immigration Department, so I had not expected to find anything about secondary migration, but thought such matters as the appointment of bilingual information officers, the provision of funding to train Hmong interpreters, the acceptance of more Hmong after Thailand's policy of camp clearance in 1993, and the loss of infrastructure jobs relating to the Hmong in Hobart, would be on record. I also anticipated policy files referring to the wave of Hmong refugees who were not part of family reunion sponsorship but, according to Gervais Appave, came to satisfy the need perceived by the Immigration Department for leaders who were seen as community builders and for others who could make a positive cultural contribution.<sup>28</sup>

A visit to the Immigration Museum in Melbourne revealed it has no record of Hmong settlement in the state of Victoria, despite the existence of a small Hmong community in Melbourne from 1975 onwards. This community was a little smaller than that in Hobart. Museum staff members were unable to help in any way, referring me to the Immigration Department whose assistance I had already sought. An effort was made to obtain relevant resources in Laos also, but that proved impossible as the Hmong are a marginalised minority and, in addition, nothing can be printed in Hmong language in Laos. There is nothing remotely like a Western bookshop, even in Vientiane the capital, unlike Bangkok and Phnom Penh, where I found good coverage of literature on Indo-China but only one or two titles relevant to this thesis.<sup>29</sup> Another difficulty was that a number of state government employees in Tasmania, whose comments I would have liked to have recorded, interpreted the Government's privacy laws to mean that they could not talk to me about the Hmong, even in a non-identifying way, and this explains the absence of comments from some settlement areas. The fact that there are apparently few official records of the Hmong in Australia, and that a museum designated to showcase immigration to Victoria has no reference to the Hmong

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Gervais Appave, former Regional Director of Immigration, Bangkok, 17 October, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> For example, P. Lewis and E. Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*, London, 1984.

community there, makes this thesis of greater significance because it records the story and experiences of a group about whom there is little accessible, official or migration information.<sup>30</sup>

### **Literature review**

The literature which underpins this thesis can be considered in five areas. First there are the theoretical discussions of migration, diaspora and globalisation. A second area is the general background material on the Hmong. The third area is their historical background and this covers their supposed origins in China and initial migrations to other Asian countries. This is followed by literature on the exodus from Laos and life in the refugee camps of Thailand. Finally there is the work about the Hmong in the West. In much of the post-exodus literature on the Hmong, there is a sense that they are an ethnic group which is coming to terms with change, both in their country of origin because of 'progress' and in the countries to which they have migrated since the Communist takeover in Laos. Popular literature telling, for example, stories of escape and resettlement in a third country, focuses on the huge adjustment needed to live in an alien culture. This theme is reiterated in books and articles of a more academic nature and many writers detail the challenges of adjustment and the search for identity required when living in a new country, surrounded by those with different cultural expectations.

Searching for literature about the Hmong to assist in the preparation of this thesis has raised issues of relevance as well as availability. There is a body of work, mainly coming out of the United States, where the bulk of the diasporic Hmong reside. However it is not all worthy of detailed study and much of it follows the same paths and presents similar material in similar ways. Written from

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<sup>30</sup> This is not to ignore the work of others who have written about the Hmong in Australia. See for example N. Tapp, 'The reformation of culture: Hmong refugees from Laos'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 1, 1, 1988, pp. 21-37, G. Lee, 'Culture and Adaptation: Hmong Refugees in Australia', <http://www.hmongnet.org/Hmong-au/hmongoz.htm>, accessed 29 May 2006. R. Julian, When the rain is white: power, conflict and change among Hmong refugee women in Australia, paper presented at the First Hmong National Education Conference, St Paul, Minnesota, 6-8 April, 1995.

sociological, educational or health perspectives, it adds to an understanding of the Hmong but is not specifically relevant to this study. There is now literature written by Hmong and literature about the Hmong. Settlement issues, the adaptation of Hmong young people to American culture, the difficulties of adaptation for the older generation and the search for a valid diasporic Hmong identity, form a large part of what has been written.

The Hmong who came to Australia as refugees, and settled in several locations including Hobart, are little-known in many other parts of Australia. This is not surprising, since they migrated to capital cities for the most part, and are still a very small population. Currently there are only about two thousand Hmong Australia-wide.<sup>31</sup> Literature about them is not as extensive as it is for some other ethnic groups. Gary Lee, a Hmong anthropologist in Sydney, who was, like Vue Thaow, a Colombo Plan student, comments on his disappointment that the Hmong in Australia have attracted little serious research, but adds that there have been a number of government-sponsored surveys, leading to 'research fatigue' amongst the Hmong.<sup>32</sup>

The first relevant area of literature includes the works of A. Brah, N. Van Hear and R. Cohen which offer a theoretical context in which to examine the Hmong diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Brah focuses on the inter-relationship of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity generation and nationalism and creates a theoretical framework of difference, diversity and commonality which links them to an analysis of diaspora, border and location. Van Hear uses the old concept of diaspora to provide a framework in which to discuss the growth of complex transnational identities and the relationship between the homeland and subsequent places of settlement. Cohen examines a variety of diaspora and suggests that not all are of the victim variety, so broadening the term to include trade, imperial,

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<sup>31</sup> G. Lee, 'Culture and Settlement: the Present Situation of the Hmong in Australia' in N. Tapp and G. Lee, eds, *The Hmong of Australia, Culture and Diaspora*, Canberra, 2004, p.14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.3.

<sup>33</sup> Van Hear, *New Diasporas. The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, Seattle, 1998 and A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora. Contesting Identities*, London, 1996.

labour and cultural dimensions. The worldwide dispersal of the Hmong fits their definitions of diaspora whilst differing in some details. All three writers make it clear that diaspora can represent more than one journey and that redefinition of identity follows resettlement. The idea of more than one journey subtly introduces the subject of secondary migration which forms the central concern of this thesis. In the view of these authors the move from diaspora to globalisation is a logical sequence. A valuable introduction to globalisation can be found in the work of T. Schirato and J. Webb.<sup>34</sup> It places emphasis on the transformation which results from globalisation and the idea of a post-globalisation world.

The second area of relevant literature is that which offers some general background information on the Hmong. Robert Cooper is a well-known authority on the Hmong and is quoted as a source in the majority of the Hmong-related texts included in this literature review and elsewhere. In *The Hmong* he provides a general introduction and overview of the Hmong and edits contributions from Nicholas Tapp and Gretel Schwoer-Kohl. The manuscript was extensively reviewed by Gary Lee, the Hmong anthropologist, in order to ensure that details were culturally correct and appropriately interpreted.<sup>35</sup> The book was written with the stated intention of informing those working with Hmong refugees in the camps in Thailand, or those responsible for reception and assistance in countries of resettlement. Cooper sees it as a potential handbook and from a personal perspective, the book served as a useful explanatory resource when teaching and settling the later Hmong arrivals, and was of value to others assisting the Hmong when they arrived in Hobart. Cooper's book makes it clear, amongst other things, that Hmong villages were never long-term settlements, so helping in an understanding of the traditional migratory life of the Hmong.

The third area of literature which proved to be of value to this thesis, is that which deals with the history of the Hmong prior to the Indo-Chinese war. Some writers include a history, quite brief in some cases, as a setting for their

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<sup>34</sup> T. Schirato and J. Webb, *Understanding Globalization*, London, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> R. Cooper, *The Hmong*, Bangkok, 1996.

work.<sup>36</sup> This may well be because the Hmong are relatively unknown and are often confused with other South-East Asians, and writers therefore see a need for background historical material to answer the question, ‘Who are the Hmong?’, before proceeding. Historical materials on the Hmong, both in China and Laos, where Hmong communities continue to live, reveal that the Hmong have always moved due to marginalisation by the Han Chinese and confrontation over taxes and territory. These pre-Indo-Chinese War, historical perspectives have proved invaluable in providing a context for the migratory habits of the Hmong. A detailed history of the Hmong can be found in the work of Keith Quincy, who records in great detail, but is less than thorough with references. Yang Dao, a respected, Western-educated Hmong leader, considers Quincy’s book indispensable for ‘young Hmong in search of their roots and their heritage’.<sup>37</sup> Quincy describes the Hmong as the most adventurous of migrants. Sucheng Chan offers a history which is clear and well-referenced and deals thoroughly with the subject.<sup>38</sup> Chan’s comprehensive book, unlike Quincy’s work, is carefully referenced. In reviewing Chan’s work, Louisa Schein, herself an authority on the Hmong, notes that Chan has written ‘one of the most cogent and fact-filled overviews of Lao Hmong ...’<sup>39</sup> I agree with this assessment and found that the contribution of Chan’s students in the second section of the book provided helpful background and resonated with the stories told by Tasmanian Hmong.

A fourth area of literature covers the exodus of the Hmong from Laos, as a result of their involvement with the C.I.A., their reasons for leaving, their journeys and their time in the refugee camps in Thailand.<sup>40</sup> This material gives some clues as to why the Hmong have made subsequent moves in countries of resettlement, because of strong family and clan ties, and also explains why a number of Hmong remained in the camps for many years, believing that the Communists would be

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<sup>36</sup> For example, S. Chan, ed., *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, Philadelphia, 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Y. Dao, jacket comment, K. Quincy, *Hmong. History of a People*, Cheney, 1995.

<sup>38</sup> Chan, *Hmong means Free*.

<sup>39</sup> L. Schein, ‘Out of Asia: Hmong Lives in Diaspora’, *Asian Ethnicity*, 2, 1, 2001, p. 114.

<sup>40</sup> L. Long, *Ban Vinai. The Refugee Camp*, New York, 1993.

ousted from government in Laos. In this area, Lynellyn Long makes a valuable contribution to understanding the life of the Hmong in the refugee camp at Ban Vinai, which represents the next stage in the story of the Hmong who fled Laos.<sup>41</sup> In emphasising the importance of clan and family to the Hmong she throws some light on the question of secondary migration. She also describes the frustrations of trying to fit the Hmong, South-East Asian stateless people, into a Western model of support, something that did not end with resettlement, and which parallels experiences in Hobart. Long looks at how the families tried to maintain their traditions within the camp and the pressures which made this a very difficult task. She sets out the policy shifts and changes in attitude to the issue of resettlement of refugees, and the processes through which refugees must go in order to be considered for resettlement in a third country are detailed. Long describes the dilemmas in families where some members wanted to go to a third country and other members wanted to wait to see if things would change. This is similar to the experience of some of the Hobart Hmong families. One aspect which Long describes very clearly, is the demoralising effect of camp life on the inhabitants and the tragedy of the generation of young people who knew nothing but life in a refugee camp. In view of the fact that many of the Tasmanian Hmong lived in Ban Vinai, this book offers crucial background to support their stories.

Further details of life in the refugee camps can be found in an article by Dia Cha, a Hmong woman who grew up in a refugee camp and as an anthropologist returned to interview camp residents.<sup>42</sup> She gives a physical description of Chieng Kham Refugee and Napho Repatriation Camps in Thailand. She emphasises how quality of life was affected by over-crowding and, like Chan, notes that fifty percent of refugees were children who had been born in the camps or had fled Laos before they were old enough to remember the country. In terms of the young Hmong of the diaspora, Cha's description makes it easy to see why

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> D. Cha, 'Hmong and Lao refugee women: reflections of a Hmong-American anthropologist', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005-6, pp. 1-35.

they have little connection with Laos and have never fully experienced the traditional way of life of the Hmong. She notes that the Secret War had already caused changes to traditional Hmong culture before the exodus to Thailand and the subsequent diaspora. In particular, she comments on the changed roles in household work patterns and the allocation of responsibilities and resources, accelerated by the war. These issues help to explain some of the attitudes of the young Hmong in the West and also suggest that the efforts of older Hmong to make them retain their 'Hmongness' are perhaps unrealistic. Cha fleshes out the policy which led to the closure of the camps, which limited services and resettlement opportunities, in the hope of reducing the attempts to leave Laos for the West. It was this closure of camps which led to the last intake of Hmong refugees in Tasmania. Cha had the advantage of being an 'insider' in the camps to a certain extent, but at the same time experienced difficulties because she was also an 'outsider', and she delineates this dichotomy.

The final area of interest is the life of the Hmong in the West. Most of this literature is written from the perspective of the United States of America. The bulk of the Hmong who left Laos settled there because of the influence of General Vang Pao, a popular Hmong leader who fled to America, and because of their close connections to the CIA in the Secret War.<sup>43</sup> Reference to the worldwide diasporic community and globalisation of the Hmong concerns settlement in France and Australia and includes articles about the Hmong in Argentina, Germany and French Guiana. By comparison, little has been published about the Hmong in Australia and even less about the Hmong in Tasmania.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The Secret War was so called because it was largely unreported and US government officials denied it existed. The US had signed the agreement declaring Lao neutrality but mounted the largest covert operation prior to the Afghan–Soviet War and the heaviest bombing campaign post WWII. The CIA attempted to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail, developed by the North Vietnamese on Lao territory to gain entry into South Vietnam. The US trained 30,000 Lao, mainly Hmong, to fight the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese in Laos. Vang Pao is in the news at this moment, August 2007, having been arrested in the United States for attempting to purchase arms for use in a continuing guerrilla movement in Laos.

<sup>44</sup> For example, G. Lee, 'The shaping of traditions: agriculture and Hmong society', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 6, 2005, pp. 1-33, P. Rice, 'What women say about their childbirth experiences:

T. Yang, for example, describes the Hmong community of Gammertingen in southern Germany.<sup>45</sup> He claims that there is nothing official on record about this community, which was resettled in Germany after reaching the airport in Bangkok, en route to Argentina, only to discover that the Argentinian government had changed its mind about taking them. The German government offered to settle them and as a result five Hmong families went to Germany accompanied by five Lao families in the same position. The future outlook of this small Hmong community is uncertain, but it is clearly not viable. The issues faced by this isolated community in Germany are similar to those faced by unviable Hmong communities elsewhere, the remaining Tasmanian Hmong community in particular, and have relevance to the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong.

Another small settlement of interest is the one in French Guiana, which has been studied by Patrick Clarkin.<sup>46</sup> He suggests that this community is probably unique in that many of its members have become economically independent through their farming skills, whilst maintaining their culture and traditions in replicated Hmong villages. Clarkin's main focus is the comparison between the tropical, agricultural settlement in French Guiana and Hmong resettlement in urban areas in the United States and the hypothesis that life for the Hmong in French Guiana is less stressful than life in the United States, a hypothesis which proves to be correct. The Hmong population in French Guiana is a similar size to the Australian Hmong population but a different proportion of the overall population of the country, yet it provides 50-60 per cent of the fruit and vegetables produced in the country. This paper offers useful comparative information on a less familiar aspect of the Hmong diaspora, and describes the kind of economic success hoped for by the Tasmanian Hmong.

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the case of Hmong women in Australia', *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 17, 3, 1999, pp. 237-253, C. Falk, 'Upon meeting the ancestors: the Hmong funeral ritual in Asia and Australia', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 1, 1, 1996, pp. 1-15.

<sup>45</sup> T. Yang, 'Hmong of Germany: Preliminary report on the Resettlement of Lao Hmong Refugees in Germany', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 4, 2003.

<sup>46</sup> P. Clarkin, 'Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana,' *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005-6.

Another extensive writer on refugee issues, Wendy Walker-Moffat, has noted that to research the Hmong in America is to act in a helping capacity as many refugees find teachers wherever they can.<sup>47</sup> Thus field-workers become facilitators, intermediaries, and protectors in addition to teachers. This strongly parallels the experience of teachers of refugees in Tasmania, as will be seen later in this thesis. N. Donnelly's use of oral history materials to back up her analysis of the lives of Hmong women in America, was of assistance in deciding how best to use the Hmong voices in this thesis.<sup>48</sup> Donnelly looks at the merging of traditional ways and customs with the new social situation, and studies the way in which the Hmong have been compelled to rethink their identity. This issue of redefining identity interests many other writers, including Julian.<sup>49</sup>

Since this thesis is concerned with the secondary migration of most of the Tasmanian Hmong community, the analysis of Hmong migration patterns by Chu Thao is of particular interest. This Hmong American discusses Hmong secondary migration in the United States, comparing it with migration or moving patterns in traditional Hmong society.<sup>50</sup> He believes traditional movements should be seen primarily as a consolidation of clan power, and points out that the Hmong have always moved in hope or expectation of improving their living conditions. Thao sees a direct parallel between movements in the United States and those in Laos, although the circumstances are radically different. He introduces the idea of reunification migration and betterment migration and explains the mechanics of moving.<sup>51</sup> This paper has been pivotal to my examination of the recent secondary migration of the Hobart Hmong

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<sup>47</sup> W. Walker-Moffat, *The Other Side of the Asian-American Success Story*, San Francisco, 1995.

<sup>48</sup> N. Donnelly, *Changing Lives of Refugee Hmong Women*, Seattle, 1994.

<sup>49</sup> R. Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', in N. Tapp and G. Lee, eds, *The Hmong of Australia. Culture and Diaspora*, Canberra, 2004, pp. 25-58.

<sup>50</sup> C. Thao, 'Hmong Migration and Leadership in Laos and in the United States', in T. Downing and D. Olney, eds, *The Hmong in the West: Observations and Reports*, Washington, D C, 1982, pp. 99-121.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

In considering the Hmong in Australia, it is clear that there is not a large body of published work to draw on. For this reason the work of writers such as Gary Yia Lee and Nicholas Tapp is an important contribution to the published record of the Hmong in Australia.<sup>52</sup> They look at the phenomenon of the diaspora and the increasing emphasis on globalisation as a means of creating identity. In his chapter Lee examines culture and settlement and the present situation of the Hmong in Australia, from the perspective of an insider. He looks at how a group which was mostly soldiers or subsistence farmers in Laos, has managed its new life in urbanised Australia. Lee also examines the phenomenon of secondary migration which has seen the resettlement in Queensland of Hmong from other states. His chapter is relevant to this thesis in that the Tasmanian Hmong are part of the secondary migration he discusses.<sup>53</sup> He concludes that the big challenges for the Hmong are no longer those of economic survival, or the accumulation of economic assets, but the survival of cultural identity amidst the ethnic diversity of Australia.

Julian's chapter is part of her larger project exploring the impact of globalization on Australian national identity. The Hmong provide a valuable case study and allow Julian to look at the construction of a diasporic Hmong identity in the context of the contradictions of globalism and localism.<sup>54</sup> She argues that their identity has become commodified, trivialised and marginalized in terms of acceptance in Tasmania. She also considers the role of Hmong women in this construction of identity. Julian's chapter is particularly useful for this thesis because it is coloured by her knowledge of the Hmong in Tasmania and provides a cogent sociological analysis into which their history can be placed.

Nicholas Tapp writes of the Hmong diaspora, in relation to field work he undertook in Australia.<sup>55</sup> He discusses return visits of Hmong to Laos and

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<sup>52</sup> Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*.

<sup>53</sup> Lee, 'Culture and Settlement', p. 22.

<sup>54</sup> R. Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> N. Tapp, 'Hmong Diaspora in Australia', in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*, pp. 59-97.

analyses the reasons for these. He also looks at overseas marriages, economic and other relations overseas. He considers young Hmong are in cultural crisis, a theme echoed by other writers.<sup>56</sup> He also mentions the messianic movement, the Amu, which has emerged in Queensland, and relates it to other Hmong messianic movements in the past. This group of a few families on the Atherton tablelands, including some former Tasmanian Hmong, has incorporated aspects of other world religions into their practices and rejected many things which other Hmong hold important. It developed after the secondary migration of Hmong from other parts of Australia. Tapp also describes his research into internet usage by the Hmong and explains it an aspect of the development of a globalised Hmong identity. Tapp's research identifies the continuing importance of kinship in the lives of the Hmong of the diaspora and those Hmong remaining in Asia and the development of what he calls fictive kinship, whereby Hmong, who share nothing but their clan name, develop quasi-close kin relationships worldwide.<sup>57</sup>

In her chapter, Maria Wronska-Friend writes about the costumes of the Hmong community in north Queensland and shows how they have undergone major changes in cultural meaning and significance as an expression of the group's changing identity.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, from the perspective of this thesis, some of her informants were former Hobart Hmong. Catherine Falk writes about the traditional Hmong pipes, the *qeej*, and the major roles they play, first as a private expression of death and then as a happy, public display. According to Falk, a loss of repertoire for this instrument parallels a loss of ritual meaning, and that in the West 'the *qeej* announces Hmongness through its presence as a remembered symbol rather than through its ability to impart deeply meaningful knowledge'. She likens this to the iconic status of the didgeridoo in Australia.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Downman, 'Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong'.

<sup>57</sup> M. Wronska-Friend, 'Globalised Threads', in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, p.115.

<sup>59</sup> C. Falk, 'The private and public lives of the Hmong *qeej* and Miao *lusheng*', in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*, p. 145.

The use of the *qeej* as a symbol on some of the headstones on Hmong graves at Pontville and Bushy Park in southern Tasmania supports this idea of iconic status.

Nerida Jarkey considers how processes that have goals are represented in Hmong language and might differ from their representation in English. Differences in syntax and semantics accounted for some of the difficulties Hobart Hmong experienced when learning English and were discussed as part of a professional development workshop in Hobart.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, Tapp and Lee's edited volume of carefully researched work is very important, as it offers the first comprehensive coverage of the Hmong of Australia. It is of special relevance to the writing of this thesis because it provides localised perspectives to balance the scholarship emanating from the United States. In addition it connects the Australian Hmong of the diaspora with the worldwide Hmong.

In 1997 the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs commissioned a study of refugees in Tasmania.<sup>61</sup> This volume provided the first detailed study of refugee settlement in Tasmania. It investigated the settlement process, community development and economic integration of refugees and refugee-initiated communities in Tasmania. It makes the point that it is important to understand the experiences of refugees which, while similar in some respects to those of voluntary migrants, differ in significant ways. This is particularly pertinent in Tasmania because refugees make up a larger proportion of the immigrant intake than in other states of Australia. The study resulted from extensive field-work among refugee communities and interviews with key service providers and stakeholders. The authors note that Tasmania offers a perfect context in which to address issues surrounding refugee settlement and the need to better understand them. Their profile of Hmong refugees in Tasmania and their settlement experiences concludes with an overview of the Hmong community in

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<sup>60</sup> M. Eldridge, Hmong Language, unpublished presentation for Professional Development at Adult Migrant Education Service, circa 1986. The ideas were further developed in the unpublished paper, *The Hmong in Tasmania: Lessons in Communication*, presented at the Network for Intercultural Communication Conference, Hobart, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> R. Julian et al., *Home from Home. Refugees in Tasmania*, Canberra, 1997.

Tasmania.<sup>62</sup> Since it was written, there have been great changes in the community, as this thesis will show, but the point in time described in this thorough study throws light on the Tasmanian Hmong and provides a valuable basis for further research.

Whilst the Hmong have some things in common with other refugees and diasporic communities, they are also, of course, unique in terms of history, background, culture, religion and refugee experience. The groups best suited to a comparative study therefore, are arguably the Vietnamese and the Khmer. While Tasmania never had a significant number of Khmer refugees, it once had a Vietnamese community similar in size to that of the Hmong. In the study mentioned above, the authors also looked at the Vietnamese community in Tasmania.<sup>63</sup> Their discussion is organized around key themes identified by the refugees as being significant: life in Vietnam, flight from Vietnam, settlement experiences, a sense of place, a sense of community and living in Tasmania. These themes, allowing for different ethnicities, resonate with most refugee communities and are significant to many others, providing a useful framework for studying other refugee groups. As with the Hmong, the Vietnamese community is considerably smaller now than when this report was written, due to secondary migration, mainly to Victoria.

In looking at literature from which to draw comparative material, M. Thomas' book is enlightening. I would agree with reviewer Pnina Werbner, who says it is 'a perceptive, sensitive and culturally nuanced account of one of the most recently formed diasporas - that of the Vietnamese in Sydney'.<sup>64</sup> My first exposure to refugees was with the Vietnamese boat people, which alerted me to some of the issues of importance to refugee communities. Thomas' work reminded me of issues common to both Vietnamese and Hmong, in particular aspects of settlement and cross-cultural issues. As is common with similar oral

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-116.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-85.

<sup>64</sup> M. Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows, Vietnamese-Australian Lives in Transition*, Sydney, 1999.

histories, the stories Thomas records illustrate how the tellers sanitise events or tell half-truths for a variety of reasons and how other episodes are dramatised and changed in the retelling, a salutary reminder for the oral historian. Some of the themes in this book are those also dealt with in reference to the Hmong in other books mentioned: the context of their migration, their estrangement in cities, their status and place, their ties to their homeland and changing times.

A view of another diasporic community can be found in the settlement of the Khmer in the United States and Smith-Hefner explores the resilience and social transformation of Khmer identity.<sup>65</sup> She looks at the cultural discontinuities which plague all migrant groups and highlights the broadening divide between the Khmer haves and have-nots. This discussion is based on the concepts of ‘upward assimilation’, where migrants experience economic advancement and social and political assimilation over time, and ‘downward assimilation’, where there is permanent poverty and the development of an underclass.<sup>66</sup> According to Smith the Khmer have to make decisions about what is essential to their identity and what they can forsake. This would seem to be true for all refugee and migrant communities who find themselves in a new country, facing the difficult tasks of settlement and having to recreate their identity and sense of self in an alien culture. It is particularly relevant to the Hmong in Australia as they attempt to recreate a Hmong identity against the loss of traditional culture, which occurred because of the war and years in refugee camps.

This introduction has set out the rationale, the approach, and the methodology involved in the thesis. It has also explained the researcher’s relationship with the Tasmanian Hmong community and those who helped settle them in Hobart. A sample of the literature which has guided this study has been examined. The rest of the thesis comprises six chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1 looks at the history of the Hmong prior to resettlement in Tasmania, as migrant sojourners in China, settlers in other Indo-Chinese countries and as residents in

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<sup>65</sup> N. Smith-Hefner, *Khmer American*, Berkeley, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

refugee camps, noting possible precedence for later secondary migration. Chapter 2 considers the concepts of diaspora and globalisation and sets the Tasmanian Hmong into that context, again seeking possible reasons for secondary migration. Chapter 3 deals with the issues of settlement and support amongst the host culture in Tasmania, and examines whether this offers explanations for the Hmong's move to Queensland. With the same questions in mind, Chapter 4 looks at community interaction and whether the Hmong connected with the host community. Chapter 5 considers the Tasmanian Hmong community's dream of having a communal farm and becoming economically independent, and whether the non-realisation of this project motivated the secondary migration. Chapter 6 examines the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong to destinations in Queensland and offers explanations for the relocation, answering the core question of this thesis which is drawn together in the conclusion.

## Chapter 1

### History, relocation and background of the Tasmanian Hmong

This chapter addresses the historical context of the Tasmanian Hmong by looking at literature which records the history of the Hmong in Asia, including their involvement in the Secret War, their exodus from Laos, their sojourn in refugee camps in Thailand, and the eventual resettlement of a number of Hmong in Tasmania. The chapter examines this history for any indications that might suggest reasons for the secondary migration of the Hmong from Tasmania to Queensland.

From the earliest recorded presence of the Hmong in China, it is clear that they have never been a static people and their history is one of many migrations. Whilst past migrations have taken them from northern to southern China, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand, there is some doubt expressed as to their origins. Quincy provides a very detailed description of their early history.<sup>1</sup> These tribal people are thought by some to have originated in northern Mongolia but others argue that they came from Siberia or even further west, possibly the Middle East. Father Savina, a scholarly Catholic missionary to Laos, who published his work for the Society of Foreign Missions in 1924, maintained that the Hmong had non-Asian origins.<sup>2</sup> He believed they were not of Chinese origin because they ate with spoons, their complexion was too light, some had hair colours other than black and some even had blue eyes, as noted by the earlier missionaries to China. He considered these characteristics were northern European traits.<sup>3</sup> This view accords with Hmong legends which tell of ancestors with pale skin and light hair, who were singled out by the Chinese and systematically eradicated.<sup>4</sup> Quincy quotes an old Hmong man who said when he was young he remembered the Chinese coming to search for ‘white’

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<sup>1</sup> K. Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cheney, 1988, p.17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> See P. Lewis and E. Lewis, *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., London, 1998, p. 102.

babies and how the parents of the one white baby in the village hid in the jungle until the Chinese had gone.<sup>5</sup>

Quincy links the Hmong with Siberia because of their practice of shamanism which he says originated in that area.<sup>6</sup> He supports this view with reference to records of Caucasian mummies being found in Xinjiang, northern China. He suggests that the Hmong were a subgroup of the Caucasian population of Siberia and their homeland could have been the Iranian plateau or southern Russia.<sup>7</sup> Cooper considers it only conjecture that the Hmong came from Mongolia, Tibet or even Lapland.<sup>8</sup> Quincy, committed to the idea of the Hmong having come from Siberia, describes them as the most adventurous of the Siberian migrants, trekking southwards to the Yellow River.<sup>9</sup> Wu Dekun, a Chinese academic, says seven million Chinese consider themselves Hmong, more than the number quoted by most authorities.<sup>10</sup> Wu says this is due to increased national consciousness and ability to claim different ethnicities since the Cultural Revolution.<sup>11</sup> He says the first references to the Hmong were found on ancient shell and bone carvings of the Shang dynasty, which he dates as sixteenth to eleventh century BC, a little different from Quincy's dates. Wu's discussion reveals a group which was often in conflict with its neighbours and which moved westwards as the population increased. Moves to the southwest were the result of conflict.<sup>12</sup> The Hmong were seen as rebellious, ferocious, savage hordes who stood in the way of a re-unified China. Geddes speaks of their stubborn independence and suggests,

The concept is of a single migratory group of people who, advancing out of the mists of antiquity, met at the limit of the migration of another group of people — the Chinese — who drove them from the valleys, causing them to scatter widely through the mountains.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*. p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> R. Cooper, *The Hmong*, Bangkok, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*. p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Wu, Dekun, 'A brief introduction to the Hmong of China', *Hmong Forum*, 2, 1991, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> W. Geddes, *Migrants of the Mountains: The cultural ecology of the Blue Miao (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*, Oxford, 1976, p. 7.

According to Quincy, by the sixth century China was in disarray but the Hmong kingdom was at its height.<sup>14</sup> The Hmong were prized as military allies by the warring factions and their reputation as warriors was well-established. The Sung dynasty ( 960-1279 AD ) finally defeated the Hmong and their kingdom ceased to exist. Quincy describes it as ‘the end of their golden age’.<sup>15</sup> It was at this stage that a messianic doctrine emerged amongst the Hmong, believing that someone would deliver them from the Chinese and restore their ancient kingdom. This is relevant in view of the emergence of the Amu, a more recent messianic group in Queensland, to which some of the Tasmanian Hmong belong. Subsequent Hmong uprisings were extremely violent, not only in China, but also in Vietnam and Laos, where Hmong had migrated to avoid Chinese oppression. Most of the Hmong fled west and south-east and became dispersed and geographically isolated. According to Quincy, Hmong settlement in northern Laos took place because the Hmong had been influenced by a Chinese opium merchant, Ton Ma, who persuaded them that there was very fertile land in the Xieng Khouang region of Laos and offered to lead them there.<sup>16</sup> The Hmong were opium growers and Ton Ma hoped to increase his trade in the area once the Hmong had developed their farms. A group of Hmong accompanied Ton Ma along the mountain ridges, leading their livestock, and found the area as described. They established a number of villages and had an assured market for their opium.<sup>17</sup> Other Hmong joined them in what was subsequently known as The Plain of Jars, a place of great antiquity and archaeological interest, a strategic area in the Secret War and home to many of the Tasmanian Hmong.

### **Stages of Modern Historical Hmong Experience**

W. Smalley describes this stage of Hmong history as the Lao penetration stage. It is helpful here to look at his analysis of stages of modern historical

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<sup>14</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*. p. 47.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Hmong experience.<sup>18</sup> In prefacing these stages he comments on the scope of the changes in traditional culture and the amount learned by the Hmong in the years of military involvement during the Secret War.<sup>19</sup> He lists a number of stages but explains that they are not discrete in themselves and cannot be dated as they occurred at different times for different Hmong. In validating this idea he adds that, for example, in 1974 Yang Dao found Hmong in border areas of Laos who spoke Chinese but not Lao, implying that they had not moved on from the Lao penetration stage. He sees this as the time when a small number of Hmong who were oriented to China or North Vietnam, moved into Laos and encountered other ethnic minorities and the power structures of the French and the Lao. This is followed by the Laos traditional stage, when the Hmong had increased in number in Laos but remained in their mountain areas and had little contact with others. The next stage Smalley describes as the Lao adaptive stage. At this point the Hmong had developed stable relations with other ethnic groups but they were anxious to be politically recognised as part of the nation of Laos. The Laos resettlement stage heralded the loss of some traditional culture as the Hmong were forced out of their mountaintop villages and resettled in conglomerations such as Long Cheng, due to the exigencies of the Secret War and their involvement with the CIA. The intensity of this situation and the confrontation it heralded, led to the exodus of the Hmong to Thailand and the Thai camp stage. The final stage Smalley lists is the United States resettlement stage. Clearly the United States can be replaced with the names of other countries of resettlement. When Smalley's work was published in 1986, the secondary migration of Hmong within the United States had already commenced but surprisingly he does not include this in his analysis. The following figure has been created from Smalley's textual analysis but expanded to include the additional stage of secondary migration. These stages should be kept in mind as the story of the Lao Hmong unfolds.

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<sup>18</sup> W. Smalley, 'Stages of Hmong cultural adaptation', in G. Hendricks and B. Downing, eds, *The Hmong in Transition*, New York, 1986, pp. 7-25. Smalley is also known for his contribution to the development of RPA Hmong script.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

**Figure 1 Stages of Modern Historical Hmong Experience**

based on W. Smalley.

<b>Laos Penetration</b>	Hmong move into Laos. Oriented to China and Vietnam. Experiencing new ethnic groups, new power structures, Lao and French.
<b>Laos Traditional</b>	Hmong now a significant ethnic group but keep to mountains, avoiding contact with more powerful groups.
<b>Laos Adaptive</b>	Time of stable relations with other ethnic groups. Hmong able to cope with them. Seeking greater input into life of Lao state.
<b>Laos Resettlement</b>	Hmong forced from their villages because of Secret War. Establishment of conglomerations of mixed ethnicity, dependent on US aid. Loss of traditional culture and intense impact of new cultural forces.
<b>Thailand Camp</b>	Persecution by Pathet Lao and Vietnamese army causes traumatic exodus to refugee camps. Under protection of UNHCR with hope that Communists will be defeated, enabling repatriation. Ongoing loss of culture and tradition.
<b>USA Resettlement</b>	Acceptance that Communists will not be ousted. Search for third country (US or elsewhere) and resettlement. On-going loss of culture and tradition and challenge of re-identification in an alien culture.
<b>Secondary Migration</b>	Clan reunification and betterment relocation in country of resettlement. Attempts to rebuild tradition and culture.

In keeping with Smalley's analysis, the commencement of the French colonisation of Indo-China in 1863 can be viewed as an ongoing part of the Lao penetration stage. The colonisers set government monopolies on the sale of opium, alcohol and salt. This was virtually a tax on the hill-tribes, including the Hmong. After the capture of the rebellious Ham Nghi, in which the Hmong assisted, the French dealt directly with the Hmong instead of through Lao or Vietnamese officials.<sup>20</sup> This did not mean however, that the French acknowledged the devastating effect of taxes on the Hmong. In 1896, a new tax on opium was, in reality a tax on the Hmong, as they were the prime opium

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

producers. Part of the tax had to be paid in opium, for which purpose it was valued lower than the market price. The new Hmong leader in the Xieng Khouang region, Tong Ger Moua, successfully negotiated with the French to lower taxes and to always discuss with the Hmong any changes in policy which might affect them. This was not the case in other areas of northern Laos where the Hmong lived. In 1916 taxes were raised again and again the tribal minorities carried the biggest burden. Those who did not pay were imprisoned and the Hmong became increasingly resentful.

In 1919 there was a Hmong rebellion because the Hmong wanted an independent Hmong kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Eventually the French agreed to an autonomous district east of the Plain of Jars, where the Hmong governed themselves within the clan structure. However, there was infighting between the clans and this has had ramifications to the present day. Resentment of the French increased when they instigated a plan to develop roads in Laos and they needed to obtain the finance in the local areas. Since the roads were planned to prevent the reclaiming by the Thai of their former territory, the strategic areas for construction included Xieng Khouang. As this was a Hmong area, they were expected to provide the work crews. Although the plans had been discussed with the Hmong beforehand, the reality was unlike anything the Hmong could have imagined. They were often taken away from their farms and families for long periods of time and laboured under very difficult conditions in treacherous terrain. Some Hmong deliberately left their homes and moved away until the road construction finished in 1924.<sup>22</sup> The Hmong fought alongside Pa Chay, the leader of the Vietnamese Hmong, and one very successful tactic they employed was causing rockslides to threaten the French. The French started to relocate Hmong villages as a result of the Hmong retaliation over taxes, cutting off food supplies and support, and so ended what was called the Mad Man's War.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.132.

The next Hmong leader of note was Touby Lyfoung but internal Hmong politics were far from smooth and there was ongoing discord between the clans.<sup>24</sup> Touby Lyfoung had a vision of improving the position of the Hmong and giving them greater power. He planned to persuade the French to work towards this end and arrange for the Hmong to be represented in the national government. He wanted political autonomy at the local level and improved infrastructure in the Hmong areas. Before this could come about, France was defeated by Germany in 1940. The presence of the Japanese in Laos was the result of the fall of the French government and the signing of a treaty with the Vichy government.<sup>25</sup> Although the French colonial system was still operating in Laos, Japanese troops were also there. In an effort to counter Japanese influence the French started to create the infrastructure that had been so lacking during their administration. Opium was still essential to the French to provide much-needed revenue.

In 1944 French commandos parachuted into the Plain of Jars, the centre of Hmong territory, and in 1945 more commandos joined them. Some Hmong supported the French while others supported the Japanese, seeing this as a way to end French domination and unfair taxes and potentially a way to obtain their own territory. They formed links with Lao Issara, a national group dedicated to establishing Lao independence at the end of WWII. As Chan notes, the Hmong have been significant in Lao politics for a number of reasons.<sup>26</sup> Their territory of Xieng Khouang abuts Vietnam and has been a contested area on many occasions. The Hmong are renowned fighters capable of guerrilla warfare and especially experienced in the mountainous terrain, which became their home. Even more important was their involvement in the opium trade which was crucial to the French colonial government which planned to finance their war against the Vietminh from opium revenue. At the same time the French did not want the opium to get into the hands of the communist Vietminh where it could be

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> S. Chan, ed., *Hmong Means Free: Life in Laos and America*, Philadelphia, 1994, p.11.

exchanged for arms on the Chinese border. The illicit opium trade was taken over by the Kuomintang nationalist Chinese at the end of WWII, making Burma their headquarters and later Thailand, in the area known as the Golden Triangle, where Burma, Thailand and Laos come together. WWII deprived American addicts of their supply of the opium derivative, heroin. After the war, the mafia became involved in heroin trafficking. American GIs fighting in Vietnam created a social problem in the United States after the Vietnam War because they had become dependent on the drug during their war service. The communist Pathet Lao used profits from opium to finance their revolutionary movement. According to Chan the Hmong, the opium farmers, have been pawns in the opium trade. She considers that 'the hands of every nation and group that has vied for political power in Laos and Vietnam in the last century have been stained by opium.'<sup>27</sup>

In 1946 the French successfully retook Laos and the Hmong were allowed to reclaim their villages. In 1947 Laos became a member of the French Union. Territory on the west bank of the Mekong River was returned to Laos by Thailand. The plan to make Laos a constitutional monarchy under the French led to the establishment in 1950 of the Pathet Lao, which included members of the Lao Issara who worked closely with the Vietminh in Vietnam. The Pathet Lao fought against the French in the First Indo-China War and although some Hmong fought with the Pathet Lao, the majority sided with the French. The intention was to make the French increasingly dependent on the Hmong and their opium and to use this dependence to their own political advantage.<sup>28</sup>

The Americans became involved in supporting anti-communist forces in the region and their fear of Communism led to their continuing presence in Indo-China and in particular to their involvement in Lao politics. Chan considers it 'well-nigh impossible to summarize what happened in any cogent manner'.<sup>29</sup> The Americans were unable to station troops in Laos because of the 1954 Geneva

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

Convention, which claimed it as a neutral country. In 1955 the United States Program Evaluation Office was established, and by this means, retired military officers and those designated 'reserve status' were able to train army officers of the Royal Lao Army and the Lao police. The whole of the Royal Lao Army was, in fact, paid by the United States.<sup>30</sup> The American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was called in to support this activity and they became involved in an attempt to influence the Lao elections.<sup>31</sup> Despite these efforts, the Pathet Lao gained a number of seats. The government leader Prince Souvanna was a neutralist but with the shock swing to the left, the Americans cut off aid to Laos. US aid was greater than the Lao national budget so this action had a disastrous effect on the Lao economy which brought about the demise of the neutralist coalition.<sup>32</sup> The Pathet Lao set up headquarters in the Plain of Jars, the area where the Hmong were concentrated. Vietnamese troops entered northern Laos to support the Pathet Lao and the Americans ignored the Geneva accords and openly formed a Military Assistance Advisory Group. At this point the CIA began recruiting the Hmong to form a mercenary army. Contrary to the Geneva accords, the Americans flew US Army Special Forces or Green Berets into Laos to train the Royal Lao Army and the Hmong.

The next period is what Smalley describes as the Lao Resettlement stage when Hmong were gathered together in conglomerations for their safety and relied on the support of the Americans for their existence. Contact was made with the Hmong leader Vang Pao who had risen to the rank of general, encouraged by the French. They had given him a large cache of weapons when they left Laos. The CIA negotiated support from the Hmong in return for weapons, salt, food and medical supplies and promised to aid the Hmong in their fight for their own territory. Air America, chartered by the CIA, flew in supplies for the Hmong and the Royal Lao Army. Hmong were evacuated from the Plain of Jars to Long

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

Cheng in the mountains, as the communist forces advanced. Long Cheng was virtually a large refugee camp, totally dependent on American aid. This evacuation to Long Cheng represents another major shift in Hmong existence and further loss of traditional culture and lifestyle. Because of the devastation of the war, less land was available for opium production and corn and rice became cash crops. Although the Hmong had formerly used silver as a sign of wealth, as members of General Vang Pao's army they were now paid in Lao *kip* the official Lao currency, which was subject to fluctuations and inflation. Life in the conglomerations introduced many Hmong to the cash economy.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, some enterprising Hmong adapted very well to this and, for example, built an ice factory at Long Cheng. They became photographers, dentists, radio repairers, bakers, broom makers, tailors and cobblers.<sup>34</sup> The abandonment of many Hmong villages heralded the decline of Hmong subsistence farming and further dependence on a cash economy.

By 1963 the Hmong were being supplied with forty tons of aid per day.<sup>35</sup> From 1966 to 1968 intensive bombing caused many Hmong to move to Long Cheng and Sam Thong and relative safety. The towns and surrounding villages grew rapidly and this resulted in a further breakdown in the traditional lifestyle which can be linked to the degeneration of Hmong culture and tradition which continues to this day. It also represents the beginning of several major displacements of the Hmong, culminating in the diaspora.

As the Vietnam War escalated the Americans and the communists bombed the Ho Chi Minh trail and Lao territory nearby. This was a violation of Lao neutrality which began with reconnaissance flights by the Americans who were then attacked by the communists. Fighter planes then accompanied the reconnaissance flights and over two million tons of bombs were dropped in the

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<sup>33</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

1960s, more than the total tonnage dropped in World War II.<sup>36</sup> The Hmong areas of North-East Laos were badly affected and unexploded ordnance continues to maim and kill to this day.

The navigation systems on Phou Pha Thi Mountain in Xieng Khouang Province were guarded by the Hmong and the Ho Chi Minh trail became the only supply route for the Viet Cong. The attempt by the communists to keep the trail open, and the American attempts to totally destroy it, led to the death of many Hmong. In addition an estimated quarter of the Hmong fighting in the secret army were killed.<sup>37</sup> By 1968 there were three hundred US sorties a day violating Lao neutrality as guaranteed by the 1962 Geneva Protocol. The communists likewise bombed Laos. By the late 1960s the Plain of Jars, previously home to many of the Hmong, was communist territory and the headquarters of the Pathet Lao. Under their leader General Vang Pao, the Hmong retreated to Long Cheng but the Vietnamese captured it and the Hmong withdrew to the south. In time they fought back and regained their headquarters at Long Cheng and rebuilt the damaged base camp. The leadership of Vang Pao at this time explains the extent to which he is still revered in the diaspora.

By 1971 the Americans were looking for a way to pull out of South-east Asia due to disenchantment with the war and anti-Vietnam war sentiments of the American people. The war in Laos had largely escaped the publicity Vietnam received and remained the Secret War. After the departure of US troops in March 1973 the different Lao factions signed an agreement which determined the establishment of a Provisional Government of National Union. This had an equal number of communists and non-communists, and three Hmong were included. Had they been successful in uniting Laos, the diaspora may never have occurred, but the government was short-lived and in 1975 fighting occurred between the Pathet Lao and Vang Pao's troops. It became clear that Vang Po and his troops were doomed and Long Cheng was once again evacuated.

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<sup>36</sup> Chan, *Hmong Means Free*, p. 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

The remaining American advisors pulled out, telling Vang Pao and his senior leaders to leave. After an attack on the Pathet Lao by Vang Pao's troops, he was removed from his position as head of the army in Military Region II, as he posed a threat to the stability of the new government. The Hmong who had evacuated Long Cheng realised they were in trouble and decided to flee Laos. The Americans flew out one plane-load and a Hmong and a Lao pilot flew two more loads, in total about a thousand Hmong. This air-lift represents the initial step in the Hmong exodus from Laos, which Smalley refers to as the Thai camp stage, and the beginning of the Hmong in diaspora. Shortly after, Vang Pao made an emotional farewell to his men and was flown to Thailand but had a change of heart and returned to Long Cheng to join his people. While there he obtained information from Yang Dao who had been to Russia, that the Russian president had declared that because of the Hmong it had taken much longer to achieve a communist revolution in Laos. The president also stated that the Hmong should be liquidated for the good of international communism.<sup>38</sup> Fearing the consequences of this news, some of the Hmong remaining in Laos left on foot to join Vang Pao, in the hope that America would honour its promise to help them. Others formed guerrilla units which continued to ambush government troops. Some of the Hmong who had supported the Pathet Lao, were appointed to government positions. The government forces attacked the Hmong guerrilla stronghold in the Phou Bia region and defoliants such as napalm were used. The Hmong also report that biological and chemical warfare took place which led to sickness and death and influenced thousands of Hmong to undertake the treacherous journey on foot to Thailand.<sup>39</sup>

This very complicated history has been presented to provide assistance in understanding the place of the Hmong in the history of the region and to ground the exodus of the Hmong to Thailand in the context of the Secret War which was eventually the basis for yet further marginalisation of the Hmong. It also goes

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<sup>38</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*, p. 207.

<sup>39</sup> Chan, *Hmong means Free*, p. 46.

some way to explaining the loss of traditional culture brought about by the involvement of the Hmong in the Indo-China war. This loss of culture and the dislocation involved during the war has had implications for the settlement of the Hmong in third countries in the West, and for secondary migration in the diaspora.

### **The exodus**

As we have seen, Smalley's Stages of Modern Historical Hmong Experience describe the exodus as the Thailand Camp stage. There was persecution of the Hmong by the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese army after the communist takeover of Laos. When the Vietnamese troops started to visit Hmong villages offering assistance, the inhabitants became very suspicious. One informant told me the Vietnamese injected her husband in three places and he later died. She believed that his death was caused by the injections.<sup>40</sup> Another young woman recounted the circumstances of the Vietnamese soldiers visiting her village.<sup>41</sup> When she was ten years old, the soldiers arrived while she, her father and her brother were picking corn. The soldiers shouted 'Don't move', surrounded the village and threatened to shoot. Then a shot was fired, hitting a tree near where the young girl was standing. From then on the family was on the run from the Vietnamese believing life in the refugee camp would be better than being shot. Other informants talked of Vietnamese soldiers gaining the trust of the children not in school and asking the children about their fathers' activities, taking away the men but assuring relatives they would be back soon. When the men did not return, the Hmong knew they were in trouble and decided they would be safer in the jungle. Several informants said that the Vietnamese were very polite.

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<sup>40</sup> Elderly Hmong woman, F4, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>41</sup> Hmong woman, F6, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

“Please come to the office and we will appoint you as a village leader, or we will give you a job.” At the office, we were questioned. Many were placed in re-education camps; they never even got to say goodbye to their families.<sup>42</sup>

The Vietnamese mentioned that they would come and build a school for us so that everyone can have a chance to have a better education... The communists said they didn’t want any of our men and that they will go away. So we had a party for them to say farewell to them... When night came and everyone was asleep, the communists came and shot at us.<sup>43</sup>

A male informant said that, although he does not remember much about the war, he still remembers the Vietnamese coming and how they tried to force men to join the Pathet Lao. His father decided the family should leave. Another older man described how the Pathet Lao, with the Vietnamese, took over the small hospital at Ban Son, where he was working as a nurse.

Lao government employees were being sent to Houa Panh [North-east Laos] for retraining and many people died. We assessed the situation. The Pathet Lao could do as they liked and they hated the Hmong. It was a group decision to leave.<sup>44</sup>

Writing their stories in 1988, one Hmong man said,

They destroyed our villages and they burnt our houses. Some of the people couldn’t escape, some of them were dead from burning and couldn’t escape and some tried to escape and were shot. It is so sad to see our people just gone like the wind.<sup>45</sup>

Another story writer said

When I escaped I saw many dead people on the way. There was one lady, she had a baby on her back. The mother, father and baby were dead, half in the water. They had been shot.<sup>46</sup>

And again

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<sup>42</sup> Hmong man, M10, interviewed Cairns, 15 August, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in D. Levett, ed. *Stories from the Hmong*, Hobart, 1988, p.1.

<sup>44</sup> Older Hmong man, M9, interviewed Cairns, 14 August, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Levett, *Stories from the Hmong*, p.2.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Levett, *Ibid.*, p. 4.

...some long dead and some newly dead, everywhere. Some families died together in one group, some families were separated and a lot of children died in the big water dam, because when the Vietnamese shot the families, the children were crying so they tried to send them away and threw them in the dam'.<sup>47</sup>

The Hmong left in family, clan or village groups. In the jungle they suffered attacks of 'chemical rain' which caused infected eyes and body rashes. Others were poisoned when they drank water from streams or ate leaves from trees according to my informant.<sup>48</sup> Some survived in the jungle for four years before making the final decision to leave the country. They could no longer tolerate the stress of hiding from the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese, scavenging what food they could find in the jungle and being unable to return to their villages.

Those who left from the Plain of Jars area of Xieng Khouang had many kilometres to trek through the jungle. Many years ago a Hmong man told me how he had gathered together all he could carry — a sack of rice and some valuables— and, as he left his village, the cattle, fowls and dogs tried to follow. In the jungle it was essential to remain hidden from the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese. Fires could not be lit for fear of disclosing the whereabouts of the Hmong, so no cooking could be done. Many survived on leaves and grasses, pith from banana trees and whatever else they could find. A younger woman said, 'I remember walking only at night because we were scared the Vietnamese would see us. I sat on the sack of rice my father carried.'<sup>49</sup>

Others were nearer the Mekong and had to make their way to the river and attempt to find the safest place to cross to Thailand. One man said,

Our dogs tried to follow us into the jungle but they couldn't keep up and they were shot and eaten by the Vietnamese soldiers. In the jungle we went without food. Our faeces were like animal droppings and we were no better than animals. Many old people asked us for poison to help them to die. They over-dosed on opium. My friend's uncle and aunt killed themselves this way. Uncle had been shot in the leg and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> Older Hmong man, M19, interviewed Innisfail, 25 August, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Hmong woman, F12, interviewed Cairns, 16 August, 2005.

couldn't be carried. We covered them with a blanket and said goodbye. Some people dosed their little children with opium so they wouldn't cry and inform the enemy soldiers where we were. Some of them gave their babies too much opium and they never woke up. We nearly lost grandma because she got stuck in the spiked bamboo and we could not see in the dark. We searched for her but we couldn't call out in case the Pathet Lao or the Vietnamese heard us.<sup>50</sup>

Eventually making their way to the Mekong River, the border with Thailand for many kilometres, the Hmong hoped to cross safely and obtain United Nations refugee status. Crossings were dangerous in the extreme. The drama of the escape did not end in the jungle or even at their entry to Thailand. One man told me,

I swam across the Mekong, pulling my young brother and grandma with bamboo to support me. Father pulled mother with the little one on his back and two young ones following. Father nearly drowned; he swallowed a lot of water. At the middle we heard shots and were afraid it was the Vietnamese. Uncle was shot on the other [Thai] side and jumped into the water leaving my young brother on the river bank. The following morning mother and father found my little brother sitting alone. Uncle was found a injured about kilometre along the bank.<sup>51</sup>

A woman said 'I had my young brother on my back but he drowned in the Mekong. I was exhausted and I had to let him go. He was six.'<sup>52</sup> Another man wrote,

After three or four hours I was surprised to find the Mekong River. I didn't know if I was looking at clouds or a river. I looked across and could see a motor bike and cars and buildings so I knew it was Thailand. I soaked some leaves to eat before I could swim across. I took off my clothes and only wore shorts. I swam from about ten or eleven pm and I got to Thailand about three am. It was very hard and I nearly died in the water.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>52</sup> Hmong woman, F7, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Levett, *Stories from the Hmong*, p. 6.

Many Hmong perished in the Mekong, targeted by Thai police or officials who considered them illegal immigrants, and bandits who pretended to be police and took all their valuables. One informant said,

We crossed the Mekong in a pirogue and Thai bandits pushed us back to a small island and they killed those with no money. Two people escaped from the island and told the United Nations who rescued us. The Thai police asked for our leader but we said we had no leader. They made me and another man the leaders but they had no time to talk to us; they were busy so they put us in prison for three days. We only had a little food. The others stayed away from the police station. After three days we got refugee status and were sent to Ban Vinai, about fifty kilometres away.<sup>54</sup>

Once over the Mekong, one woman told me,

The Thai soldiers took us to a cave and they thought my husband was the leader of the whole group and took him away. We thought they would kill him so we prayed and did ceremonies to ask for his safety. There were guns going all the time and we thought he had been killed. They let him go and they took us to a temporary camp where we met up with relatives.<sup>55</sup>

Another Hmong woman said,

About one thousand people started the journey [in my group] but some were lost on the journey across the mountain tops. The communists forced some of us back. When we reached the Mekong a few men swam across to let the Thai know we were there and to get help. The Thai came back across the river to the group of three hundred and seventy who were waiting and they killed a man and a woman in front of us. They raped, stole money and belongings. One man refused to hand over his gun so they shot him. They raped a beautiful woman in front of us. She cried for help so they killed her.<sup>56</sup>

Experiences of this magnitude were reiterated by most of the informants and they were severely traumatised when they finally reached the refugee camps.

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<sup>54</sup> Older Hmong man, M9, interviewed Cairns, 14 August, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Hmong woman, F2, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>56</sup> Older Hmong woman, F14, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

## The refugee camps

After successfully obtaining refugee status most of the Hobart Hmong went to Ban Vinai camp. One man told of spending a month in a holding camp before Ban Vinai was ready to take refugees.

It was a very small camp, about an acre. The toilets were full; there was shit everywhere. The conditions were dreadful and we were locked in like prisoners. Many people died, especially the babies.<sup>57</sup>

Hmong explaining about Ban Vinai told me ‘We were given just enough rice once a month. We had meat once a week.’<sup>58</sup> Another man said

In the camp people developed a certain state of mind. Some of them had lost limbs from bombs and mines. People drank rust from nails, iron oxide, and death was very quick. I worked in the hospital after two months training, but I resigned after some time as too many children were dying. You cry with the parents every day. You can’t stop.<sup>59</sup>

There were 45,000 people at Ban Vinai camp at one stage. According to Long it was like a vast, bustling city, nothing like a Hmong village. It was one of the most densely populated places in the world with that number living on approximately 400 acres.<sup>60</sup> Tin-roofed wooden barracks housed ten families, lean-tos were built to increase living space and small streams were open sewers.<sup>61</sup>

One informant was asked to build houses in Ban Vinai, as there was not enough accommodation. Residents were allowed to go out of the camp to collect grass to make the roofs and the local Thais sold bamboo and timber which everyone bought. Many of the Hmong had lived at Long Cheng, the American conglomeration in Xieng Khouang province, as refugees in their own country, totally dependent on the Americans, and this new refugee existence had similarities. Several informants described it as a place of overcrowding, disease,

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<sup>57</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>58</sup> Hmong woman, F6, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Hmong man, M10, interviewed Cairns, 16 August, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> L. Long, *Ban Vinai. The Refugee Camp*, New York, 1993, pp. 55-58.

<sup>61</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

death, murder and rape. 'We nearly lost our fourth child. There were lots of flies and the toilets and rubbish had a very bad smell.'<sup>62</sup>

Despite the attempts to maintain traditional culture in the camps, the conditions under which the Hmong were living added to a further breakdown in community, both at the family and clan level. The clan is an intrinsic part of Hmong tradition and culture. It 'provides the primary means of identifying relationships on the basis of sharing 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.'<sup>63</sup> In these patrilineal families, marriage is exogamous. The clan is also the basis of a system of obligation, and the sharing of a clan name infers a willingness to offer assistance and support even to those of the clan you have never previously met. Smalley comments that 'the extent to which traditional social structures were shredded in camp life depended on the family history of disaster.'<sup>64</sup> The word 'shredded' creates a very powerful image of the destruction of culture. He adds that whilst some camps attempted to maintain the 'spatial proximity of traditional relationships', Ban Vinai did not.<sup>65</sup> The majority of the Tasmanian Hmong were housed in Ban Vinai.

The Thai government built a school for each section of the camp. They were staffed by volunteer teachers who used Thai and Lao languages.<sup>66</sup> Other volunteers taught the elderly in Hmong. These classes were free but English lessons had to be paid for. There was no library or resource material, however. Smalley considers the education provided intensified the desire for Hmong literacy and the motivation to learn English.<sup>67</sup> Hmong informants told of some infrastructure jobs in the camp, such as interpreting for UN staff, doctors and embassy staff. Others had jobs with work details and as security officers, but this

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<sup>62</sup> Hmong woman, F5, interviewed Brisbane, 10 August, 2005.

<sup>63</sup> G. Lee, 'Culture and Settlement: The Present Situation of the Hmong in Australia', in Tapp and Lee, eds, *The Hmong of Australia*, p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Smalley, 'Stages of Hmong Cultural Adaptation', p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Hmong man, M9, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

<sup>67</sup> Smalley, 'Stages of Hmong Cultural Adaptation', p. 18.

was unpaid. In some camps, residents were allowed to leave the camp to seek employment locally. Sometimes it was picking cotton and were paid one US dollar an 11-hour day. One enterprising man bought a camera in the market, run by the local Thais, and built a small dark room of mud and rice hay. He sold the black and white photos developed with chemicals he ordered from the market. According to Smalley, while some people existed with little more than basic coping strategies, others responded to the changes by acquiring new skills and adapting to new opportunities.<sup>68</sup> These basic coping skills were observed among some of the Tasmanian Hmong after their re-settlement but it was evident that others, particularly the men, had been able to acquire new skills in the camp.

Another feature of the camps was the conversion of some Hmong to Christianity. One informant told me that the conversion of his family came about because his brother was very sick and the Hmong shaman asked for more money for ceremonies than the family could find. The family asked the Christians to pray for the young man and he recovered. The whole family then became Christians.<sup>69</sup> The dilemma that conversion presents to Hmong is that they have to give up shamanism and ancestor worship, which are considered essential parts of Hmong identity. The consequences and the resulting conflict were evident in the camp and can also be seen very clearly in Australia, and was evident in Hobart.<sup>70</sup> Intra-ethnic difficulties and alienation emerged when Christian Hmong no longer wished to participate in shamanistic rituals or animistic practices. For example, one young Christian woman in Hobart was made homeless when she destroyed the shrine in the home of her parents-in-law.<sup>71</sup>

According to more than one informant there were also 'under the table' political groups meeting in the camps and plans for a return to Laos. In the first group of Hmong refugees to go to Thailand, up to eight hundred people were

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Hmong man, M14, interviewed Cairns, 21 August, 2005.

<sup>70</sup> For Australia in general see S. Downman, 'Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong in Australia and Thailand', unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 2004.

<sup>71</sup> Personal recollection.

trained by the Thai government, with funding from the United Nations, in order to go back to Laos, but they never did. Hmong informants talked of leaving the camps to attend meetings clandestinely.<sup>72</sup> One man said,

My parents didn't want to go to a third country. They thought communism would be destroyed and we would go back to Laos. Our culture says we must obey our parents, so we stayed. My parents changed their mind. Mother was blind so told my father he must go. After she died in Ban Vinai, we had a traditional funeral and I said to my father "If you had listened to me this would not have happened."<sup>73</sup>

These comments indicate not just the breakdown of culture but also family dynamics, and have implications for subsequent settlement in a third country. In addition, this kind of indecision resulted in separation, where some family members went to the USA and others to Australia: 'I wanted to go to my mother and father in America but because I married my husband I had to follow him [to Tasmania].'<sup>74</sup>

Despite all the difficulties, life went on. Several informants met their partners in the camp and married. A male informant, who trained as a teacher in the camp, told how he had met his future wife.

I noticed her with lots of boys so I asked if I could talk to her. She was very shy and said "What can I talk about?" I didn't talk to her family. It was a secret. She was easy to talk to and we clicked. We married after three days. I just wore ordinary clothes but she wore Hmong costume. We had a baby after one year. The older ladies helped. In an emergency they carried people to the hospital. Many women and babies died.<sup>75</sup>

Babies were born, often with no medical assistance, the sick and older people died, a brother was murdered because he had had associations with the communists, and some camp residents went back across the border several times to fight as guerrillas against the communists. One woman told me she had shut

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<sup>72</sup> Informants' codes suppressed.

<sup>73</sup> Hmong man, M10, interviewed Cairns, 16 August, 2005.

<sup>74</sup> Hmong woman, F12, interviewed Cairns, 21 August, 2005.

<sup>75</sup> Hmong man, M11, interviewed Cairns, 16 August, 2005.

memories of Ban Vinai out of her mind as it was so terrible.<sup>76</sup> Income was created from the colourful embroideries done by both men and women, and sent to relatives in the West to sell. These *pa'n dau* and other craft work provided additional funds to purchase medicine and other necessities, and in Hobart hundreds of dollars were raised by teachers, who sold them for their students and encouraged the Hmong to take a stall at Salamanca Market, where embroideries were interestingly juxtaposed with the vegetables. Money was remitted regularly from Hobart to the embroiderers in Ban Vinai.

The process of relocation to a third country involved interviews with representatives of that country. In the case of Australia, it was staff from the Australian Embassy in Bangkok. Hmong who were relocated to Tasmania, initially were allowed to do so because they were related in some way to Hmong already there. As noted earlier, the former regional director of the Immigration Program in Bangkok from 1987 to 1989 said much of what related to the Hmong was at a program level and not at a policy level.<sup>77</sup> He said that there was a 'clear recognition that the Hmong were culturally very distinct' and this meant certain practices were essential to them. It was also understood that they had 'very specific settlement needs and this led to emphasis being placed on the camp pre-departure program. It included mundane things because the Hmong were not urban people. Orientation and counselling were provided along with information'.<sup>78</sup> This officer recollected that there was a search for Hmong who were spiritual leaders, so that they could be sent to Australia to support clans already there. Immigration staff had to determine whether individual Hmong had the required skills, including being able to play the Hmong pipes for funeral rituals. There was much 'over the phone' negotiation and approval for people who had a 'clanic connection', when members of a particular clan were needed to make exogamous marriage a possibility in Australia. The policy of camp

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<sup>76</sup> Older Hmong woman, F8, interviewed Brisbane, 10 August, 2005.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Gervais Appave, former Regional Director of Immigration, Bangkok, 17 October, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

clearance, in 1993, was 'more concerned with people protection than populating Australia' Appave said; relationship to someone in Australia was of lesser importance in an operational context, where the top priority was the meeting of program quotas set by Canberra. The former Regional Director was told to 'go out there and shake those bushes' by a Canberra official, but it was increasingly difficult to find people who satisfied the immigration criteria.<sup>79</sup>

Although pre-departure programs took place, the Hmong had little understanding about where they were going. Their worldview was limited because of their isolation and lack of formal education, so the concept of relocation had little meaning, despite orientation programs. The distance to Australia was only understood in that it was nearer than the United States. One informant said 'I asked everyone for information on what to do. People told me Australia was the best country in the world.'<sup>80</sup> The cultural differences were not comprehended, but rumours circulated in the camps, such as the one which frightened people when they heard that in the West, the deceased were cut up and body parts removed (autopsies). This rumour continued to be of concern long after relocation.<sup>81</sup>

On departing the camp, there was excitement among the Hmong but a strong concern for what the future might hold. They were leaving behind the familiar, after thirteen years in some cases, however difficult it had been, and many of the children had known nothing other than camp life. In fact this was the longest settled period for most of the Hmong, who had a history of frequent relocation of villages in order to maintain their fire field agriculture and health. In addition, the war had caused them to relocate many times. Families had attempted to recreate community in an alien place and did not know if they would ever see again those who remained behind. They were being split by the very process put in place to give them a fresh start in a third country. I was told

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Hmong man, M10, interviewed Cairns, 15 August, 2005.

<sup>81</sup> This was one of the matters raised with the directors of the Royal Hobart Hospital in 1988, when cultural needs of the Hmong were discussed.

that as the buses pulled out there were scenes of loss and grief, despite hearing that Australia was ‘freedom, laughter and happiness.’<sup>82</sup> Most of the refugees who left the camps for Tasmania had no idea where they were going. In addition, many of their leaders did not go with them to settle in Australia, so they were left without the support and guidance traditionally available to them through family and clan.

### **The Hmong community of Tasmania.**

The growth of a Hmong community in Tasmania came about through what could be described as an accident of history. Vue Thaow was one of nine students to come to Tasmania from Dong Doc National University in Vientiane, Laos in 1973, but unlike the rest of the group, he was not an ethnic Lao. He was a Hmong. As the future leader of the Hobart Hmong, Vue Thaow’s educational experiences should be noted. They were very different from those of his cohort of Lao students.<sup>83</sup> In about 1961, at the age of nine, he left home against the wishes of his parents. An uncle had told him the consequences of not being able to read or write by telling him the story of a man who delivered a note which said ‘kill the bearer of this note’ and so lost his life. This motivated Vue to ensure he could read and write by running away to school. Hmong society had strict codes of behaviour and it took courage for a boy to disobey his parents. There were few schools for Hmong children, as many of their villages were isolated and distant from population centres where it was viable to establish a school. In 1963, Vue walked three hours to a military camp and lived with the Hmong soldiers. They had limited education, but if they were not in the front line, they provided education for the children of other soldiers and, sometimes, non-military children were allowed to join in. There was no age limit to Grade 1 and children were considered old enough to attend school if they could ‘put their arm over their

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<sup>82</sup> Older Hmong woman, F8, interviewed Brisbane, 10 August, 2005.

<sup>83</sup> The following information is drawn from personal conversations with Vue Thaow and other Lao students over the years and from M. Eldridge, ‘Intensive Course for Hmong’, Education Project, Graduate Diploma of Educational Studies, University of Tasmania, 1989.

head and touch the opposite ear.’<sup>84</sup> Grade 1 could include children from five years old to young adults of twenty. There were about 160 children at the school, of whom about 20 per cent were girls. In Laos many considered it was not necessary for girls to receive education and, amongst poor people, boys were educated ahead of girls if the family could afford to allow any of their children to leave their work on the family farm, where their labour was essential.

After studying Grades 1, 2 and 3, Vue moved on to Sam Thong military depot where there was an airstrip and an American aid centre, one day’s walk from his village. A resident of his village was a medical officer at the camp and he gave a home to Vue and two other boys while they studied, only going home once a year. Studies were undertaken in Lao and French, second and third languages for Vue. He took an examination at the end of Grade 6 which allowed him to go to the capital city, Vientiane, to study Grades 8, 9 and 10 at the Teachers’ Centre at Dong Doc University where classes were in Lao and English. Vue continued into Grade 11, by which stage his parents were moving daily in order to keep safe during the Secret War, and they had no means of support once they abandoned their farm. Vue returned home at the end of the year and was forced to flee his village for ever when Muong Soui, the nearest small town on the road to the Plain of Jars, was overrun by Pathet Lao and Vietnamese forces. The following day, Vue packed up and fled to the military headquarters at Xieng Det. At the end of the second year, he volunteered to remain and look after the school for 3,000 *kip* per month, the equivalent of US \$6 dollars. After about a week, a United States Aid officer asked him to go to Pakse in the far south of Laos, to teach for two months for a wage of 30,000 *kip* or US \$60 a month.<sup>85</sup> Vue continued to work for this officer at the end of his third and fourth years.

Halfway through the fifth year, Vue went to Long Cheng, the American base in the Plain of Jars, and met a CIA officer. He worked for him at the end of his fifth and sixth years, researching Hmong history. He also got married and

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<sup>84</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> By way of comparison, a senior Lao doctor in 2005 was earning US \$25 per month.

helped his parents financially. However, the salary was insufficient to support the family and, on the advice of his brother-in-law, he decided to continue his studies to improve his prospects. His brother-in-law also provided food, accommodation and a motorbike, so that Vue could continue studying. This is typical of Hmong families, who feel a strong sense of obligation to family and clan members and support each other at all times. Vue was accepted as a candidate for the examination to study in Australia under the Colombo Plan. Australians Bill Vistarini and Geoff Burke, who were teaching Vue and had responsibility for choosing the students to study in Australia, recall that their choice of a Hmong student did not please the Lao government.<sup>86</sup> However, they stuck to their decision, which was based on merit, and said that if Vue Thaow was not allowed to accept his scholarship, none of the group would go. Vue was the only Hmong to study in Tasmania until AUSAid scholarships brought Lao students again many years later.

Vue studied at Hobart Matriculation College (now Hobart College), leaving his wife and two small children in Laos with his parents. When life in Laos became dangerous for the Hmong, his family escaped to a refugee camp in Thailand. In 1975, Vu's wife Chue and her two small children arrived, not as refugees but as the family of an international student studying in Tasmania. Later, he accepted the Commonwealth Government's offer of permanent residence and gradually established himself in the Tasmanian community. In 1977 Vue's parents and younger brother came as refugees and they remained the only Hmong in Tasmania until 1981, when some cousins and Vue's younger sister, her husband and their children came to join them under the Family Reunion visa category. This 'accident' of history, which brought Vue Thaow to Tasmania, was the forerunner of the establishment and growth of the Tasmanian Hmong community.

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<sup>86</sup> Personal conversation with Bill Vistarini in Hobart, October 1995, confirmed by Geoff Burke in Vientiane, Laos, in 2002.

As more and more Hmong were forced to flee their mountain homes in Laos, Vue felt a family and clan responsibility to help some of them reach a third country of safety. By 1995, Vue had sponsored sixty-eight family members to come to Tasmania as refugees. Members of the local community helped with their settlement but the bulk of the responsibility remained with Vue and his wife.<sup>87</sup> Chue's own family had been resettled in the United States, an example of the separation of families which so often occurs in times of war when people become refugees. It became obvious to Vue and his family that their small community was not viable. There were few clan elders. There was no shaman to perform funeral rites and other traditional Hmong ceremonies. There were few storytellers to hand on the oral tradition of the Hmong ancestors. There were insufficient clans represented or potential partners to allow the tradition of exogamous marriage to continue. Vue approached the Immigration Department to bring more Hmong from the increasing numbers in refugee camps in Thailand. The official view was that Vue had already sponsored a large number of relatives, a far larger number than that which the government considered to be a family group. Local people, along with members of parliament and the Regional Director of the Department of Immigration, Elaine Moloney, lobbied for the building of a viable community. Eventually the lobbying was successful and the Immigration Minister, Mick Young, agreed that non-family members could be sponsored.<sup>88</sup> Prior to Mick Young's intervention, Hmong were interviewed in the camps but never chosen to resettle in Australia. On lobbying the government, Vue Thaow argued that the Hmong were victims of the Vietnam War, not a separate war and on that basis it was agreed that Hmong should be allowed to resettle in Australia.<sup>89</sup>

More Hmong began to arrive. Vue sought assistance from the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS), which by this stage had a number of groups

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<sup>87</sup> My own involvement was as a friend of Vue Thaow's, a teacher of and advocate for the Hmong and as a member of a CRSS group.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Vue and Chue Thaow, 21 April, 2004.

<sup>89</sup> Member check with Vue Thaow, 3 February, 2008.

in Hobart. The CRSS groups were volunteers who assisted the government to settle refugees by offering a variety of supports in the initial stages of settlement, such as airport reception, shopping, transport to and assistance at interviews and appointments, attending health checks, opening bank accounts, applying for health-care cards and government assistance, enrolling for English classes, orientation to goods and services and so on. The Hmong set up their own CRSS group but could not handle all the new arrivals and so were assisted by other groups, mainly associated with church communities. Some of the Hmong families arriving were large, with two or three and, in one or two cases, four generations, and it was not uncommon to have as many as thirteen family members arriving together. This created problems in providing suitable accommodation, not to mention difficulties in finding transport to get people to official appointments.

One difference between the arrival of the Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s and the Hmong was that a number of Vietnamese were young, single males with no family. This was not the case with the Hmong, who all came as part of extended family groups. This was partly because they came under a different visa category but also because most of the Hmong left Laos in family groups or were attached to a family group by virtue of relationship or clan. The Hmong were under the family reunion category, being proposed by relatives or friends. The Vietnamese were initially accommodated at Mt St Canice refugee hostel where on-site medical care was provided. Childcare was available alongside the classrooms, so that the refugee parents could access the English classes at the hostel without worrying about their preschool age children, who would be brought to them when necessary. The Hmong, however, were accommodated by clan or family members until a suitable rental house was found. Most of the newly arrived Hmong rented properties in the outer Hobart areas of Moonah, Glenorchy or Springfield, which were a long way from the Adult Migrant English centre. This meant Hmong had to first take their children to childcare and then travel to the city by bus in order to attend classes. There was some childcare

offered onsite with a Hmong carer. At one stage the Hmong were bussed into the centre and classes were also organised at the Salvation Army Citadel at Moonah as well as at Bowen Road Primary School, also in Moonah, to make it easier for the adult Hmong students.

Many of the homes the Hmong rented had quite large gardens. Very quickly the newly arrived refugees started gardening, and it was easy to distinguish where they were living by the rows of vegetable seedlings in every available spot. In addition, a number of local groups and families offered their unused land to the Hmong, to cultivate vegetables as they had in Laos.<sup>90</sup> They were rewarded for their generosity, with a regular supply of fresh, organic produce, the precursors of the vegetables which eventually were sold at weekend markets, especially Salamanca. At first the Hmong were very self-conscious about the vegetables they were growing, and just gave them as gifts to their teachers and others. As mentioned, teachers had sold the embroideries the Hmong brought from the refugee camps, in order to send money to relatives still in the camps. The Hmong also submitted goods for sale at the Hobart Red Cross Arts and Crafts shop. They then hired a stall at Salamanca Market with two of their teachers and sold needlework there. This gave the Hmong the confidence and independence to eventually hire a stall to sell vegetables and sewing. This was an unusual combination but was the impetus for learning appropriate retailing English for serving at a stall. Soon there were a number of stalls and the stallholders were confident enough to answer questions about the vegetables they were selling. Of boc choy they said 'You cook it like silver beet in a little water', and they offered recipes to customers. All vegetables were sold for round figures because it was easier to learn the English! *Pa'n dau* sold with the vegetables were very popular with Salamanca market-goers. One was purchased by the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and others can be found in schools, offices and homes.

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<sup>90</sup> Land was offered by the Howrah Churches of Christ and a number of local residents, young and old, in several suburbs.

In 1988, a group of Hmong men drove to Queensland to examine opportunities in the banana industry where a Hmong family from Sydney was making a good living. Some returned to Hobart saying that they would move but others said they would remain in Hobart. By 1993-4 a number of the Hobart Hmong had moved to Queensland and joined mainland Hmong, saying that they wanted to be able to grow a greater variety of vegetables than could be grown in Tasmania and that they wanted better job opportunities. While a few families departed for Queensland, simultaneously more were arriving from the Thai refugee camps, under a camp clearance program. The UNHCR acceded to the Thai government's request to close the camps. The rate at which Hmong were leaving the camps had slowed down and it seemed as if some of the camps would become permanent settlements, which the Thai government did not want to happen. Those in the camps were still dependent on food aid and there was little prospect of them being assimilated into Thai society. The program of camp clearance commenced with receiving countries being asked to take a final number of Hmong, and other Hmong being voluntarily repatriated to Laos, with oversight provided by the UNHCR. This was followed by 'camp closure'. At this point, many Hmong who had remained in camps, hoping that one day the communists in Laos would be overthrown, finally agreed to go to a third country. Some of this group came to Hobart, whilst at the same time others were leaving Hobart to go to Queensland. In all 627 Hmong settled in Hobart, including some who were born there.

Today there are fewer than fifty Hmong left in Hobart, including twelve who have returned from Innisfail and one family of eight who returned from Brisbane. A niece and nephew of this family have joined them from Brisbane, never having previously lived in Tasmania. Another Hmong woman has moved to Hobart from Melbourne to study. Apart from the few remaining families in Hobart and their presence at Salamanca Market each Saturday, the only reminders of the larger Hmong community which once lived in Hobart are the two Hmong graves at the Catholic cemetery at Pontville, the seven graves in the

Bushy Park cemetery and an engraved stone in the International Wall of Friendship in Hobart, which includes stones from migrant communities that have made their home in Tasmania. The Hmong stone reads, '*TSOOM HMOB NPLOG NYOB TASMANIA MUAS*'. Presented by the Hmong Community from Laos as a Symbol of Friendship and Goodwill'.

## Chapter 2

### Diaspora and globalisation

Having established the place of the Hmong in an historical context, this chapter sets the diasporic experience of the Tasmanian Hmong into a theoretical frame of reference in order to avoid treating it in what Cohen describes as an untheorised or undertheorised way.<sup>1</sup> The link between diaspora and globalisation is explored and within these areas possible reasons for the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong are sought.

#### Diaspora

Whilst the Hmong diaspora is usually considered to have taken place following the Secret War and the Communist takeover, it could be argued that diaspora for the Hmong predates those events and began with the move south from northern China during the Shang dynasty between 1600-1028 BC. This led to the establishment of Hmong communities in southern China, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. Clearly these migrations were not a one-time event but continued over time.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this thesis however, the emphasis is on the more recent diaspora of the Hmong from Laos, which took them to Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Argentina and French Guiana. This diaspora occurred over a period of time when it became clear that the communists would not be ousted from Laos. It is estimated that as many as half the Lao Hmong fled the country.<sup>3</sup> After leaving refugee camps in Thailand, many families, initially those of the senior military, were resettled in the United States. Others remained in the camps for as long as fifteen years. Resettlement of Hmong in France linked them with their former colonial masters and the country where the first Hmong gained overseas qualifications. The settlement in French Guiana came about because of a suggestion to the French government made by a French missionary, Father Yves

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<sup>1</sup> R. Cohen, *Global Diasporas. An Introduction*, Abingdon, 1999, p. x

<sup>2</sup> Yang, 'Hmong diaspora of the post-war period', p.275.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

Bertrais, who had worked among the Hmong in Laos.<sup>4</sup> Those who were initially settled in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Argentina and Germany had no links with these countries other than, in the case of Australia, having relatives there, studying under the Colombo Plan.

The Hmong diaspora has similarities with other diasporas in some respects, although the Hmong have an earlier history of diaspora not necessarily shared by others. They had only settled in Laos in the last one hundred and twenty years; they had no territorial rights, but were recognised as citizens of Laos after 1947, along with other minority groups.<sup>5</sup> This did not result in equality however and they were marginalised and mostly lived in isolated villages. They suffered great upheaval in their own country before fleeing to refugee camps in Thailand and they lived in the camp for up to 15 years.

The word diaspora comes from the Greek preposition *dia* meaning over, and the verb *speiro* meaning to scatter or sow.<sup>6</sup> It implies a home centre from which dispersion takes place and incorporates the possibility of multiple journeys. An example is the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile and this diaspora usually carries a capital 'D'. A journey is implicit in the concept of diaspora and not just a casual journey but one suggesting the establishment of oneself elsewhere as opposed to a temporary exile. Brah considers a definition requires an answer to the questions who, when, how and under what circumstances the travel is undertaken. She adds that if the circumstances of leaving are important, so too are those of arrival and settling down.<sup>7</sup> In addition, diasporas are the result of collective migration, regardless of whether the journeys are undertaken individually, as families or in other combinations. There is also the possibility of some households moving on elsewhere after the initial scattering. This is a particularly important point in the search for reasons for the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong. According to Brah, it seems that secondary movement is not unusual.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> P. Clarkin, 'Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 6, 2005, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Yang, 'Hmong diaspora of the post-war period', p. 276.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> A. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contested Identities*, London, 1996, p.182.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

Diaspora suggests trauma, separation and dislocation but also the potential to provide a new beginning and so can be indicative of new hope. Clifford talks of the experiences of loss and exile in diaspora being in tension with hope.<sup>9</sup> Brah writes, 'They [diasporas] are contested cultural and political terrain where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure.'<sup>10</sup> The use of the word diaspora in relation to the Hmong resonates well in view of Brah's ideas. It calls to mind the trauma, separation and dislocation they experienced in Laos, both during the Secret War and afterwards. Then came the collective journey which included the escape from Laos to Thailand and the circumstances of that journey. The second journey was to a country of resettlement or a transnational settlement and included the importance of leaving, arrival and settlement elsewhere and the possibility of further journeys. Brah goes on to say there is always a combination of the local and the global in the identity of diasporas, and a creative tension between home and dispersion.<sup>11</sup> This provides an entry point into the idea of globalisation as associated with the Hmong and discussed later in this chapter. The rate of mass population movements in all directions has increased since the 1980s. According to Brah, this has been influenced by economic inequality within and between regions, expanding mobility of capital, people's desire to pursue opportunities which might improve their life chances, political strife, wars and famine. Brah adds that there is an increasingly untenable distinction between economic and political refugees, untenable because of the global events which underpin these categories.<sup>12</sup> She goes on to say that the concept of diaspora suggests 'border', which is a political construct, arguing that 'the concept of diaspora offers a critique of discourses of fixed origins, while taking account of a homing desire, which is not the same as a desire for homeland.'<sup>13</sup> Together, the concepts of border and diaspora relate to the notion of location. Another relevant point Brah makes is that home can be a place of safety and terror simultaneously,<sup>14</sup> which

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<sup>9</sup> J. Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9, 3, August 1994, p. 312.

<sup>10</sup> Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

was particularly so for the Hmong. Safety was encapsulated in the family, clan and village, but terror came with the war, the Pathet Lao forces and the Vietnamese army. For the Hmong to have remained at home in their village could have meant death. Brah argues that diaspora, border and the politics of location together offer a conceptual grid with which to analyse contemporary national and transnational movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital.<sup>15</sup> She also discusses the concept of diaspora space, which is described as a conceptual category which is inhabited not only by the migrants and their descendants but also houses those native to the place to which migrants move. It ‘includes the entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of staying put.’<sup>16</sup>

Brah discusses diasporas as distinct historical experiences and points out they are often composite formations made up of many journeys to different parts of the globe, each with its own characteristics. She comments, ‘Each diaspora is an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive and, perhaps, even disparate narratives.’<sup>17</sup> She goes on to say that politics, economics and cultural specificities are at play in the concept of diaspora and that ‘multiple journeys may configure into one journey via a confluence of narratives as it is lived and relived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory.’<sup>18</sup> Those individual and collective stories are the basis of the imagined community of the diaspora. This, in addition to her comments about the importance of historicising diasporas, supports the use of the individual, everyday stories of the Tasmanian Hmong community adopted in this thesis. The local constitutes one part of a larger, global story of the diasporic Hmong. The experiences of the Tasmanian Hmong can be grounded in the worldwide diasporic experiences of the Hmong who left Laos for many destinations, as a result of the communist takeover.

Van Hear quotes Safran, who says the term diaspora should be limited to populations which satisfy more precise criteria than those presented by Brah,

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

including dispersal from an original centre to two or more peripheral regions; retention of collective memory of the homeland; partial alienation from the host society; aspiration to return to an ancestral homeland; commitment to the maintenance or restoration of that homeland; and derivation of collective consciousness and solidarity from a relationship with the homeland.<sup>19</sup> It is arguable whether the Hmong as a whole fit these criteria, although it is certainly true for some of the older Hmong. Later this thesis looks at the interaction of the Hmong with the host society, finding different views on whether the Hmong have interacted well outside their own group or whether they demonstrate partial alienation from the host society, as described by Safran.<sup>20</sup> The Hmong have no ancestral homeland as such because they have been a migratory people. Instead, they have been looking for a homeland and many believed they had found it in Laos in the last one hundred or so years. Yang Pao talks of their ‘deep aspiration to blossom within the harmony of a truly independent, free and democratic Lao nation.’<sup>21</sup> The older generation still has a strong connection with Laos and General Vang Pao, arrested in America in 2007, is an example of a man who wishes to restore that yearned-for homeland, to the extent, it is alleged, of purchasing arms to continue guerrilla warfare in Laos. The attempt to build a Hmong ‘virtual community’ in the absence of a definable homeland could be seen as the collective consciousness and solidarity Van Hear describes.

Even more appropriate to the Hmong is the definition of Chaliand and Rageau, also quoted by Van Hear: ‘A diaspora is defined as the collective forced dispersion of a religious and/or ethnic group precipitated by a disaster, often of a political nature.’<sup>22</sup> Van Hear goes on to list his criteria as follows:

The population is dispersed from a homeland to two or more other territories; the presence abroad is enduring, although exile is not necessarily permanent, but may include movement between homeland and new host; there is some kind of exchange - social, economic,

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<sup>19</sup> N. Van Hear, *New Diasporas: The mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*, Seattle, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Y. Pao, *Hmong at the Turning Point*, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> G. Chaliand and J-P. Rageau, *The Penguin atlas of diasporas*, New York, 1995, cited in Van Hear, *New Diasporas*, p. 5.

political or cultural between the spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora.<sup>23</sup>

He also uses the phrase ‘transnational community’ which includes populations which are contiguous rather than scattered and may just straddle one border, apt in the case of the Hmong. The Hmong can be described as a diaspora and as a transnational community, when considering those who have settled along the border in Thailand and attempted to merge with the existing Hmong there. Those Thai Hmong had made Thailand their home when others settled in Laos. The Hmong diaspora satisfies the concept of dispersal from a homeland although they have never had ownership of territory, only having shown an identification with land where they have settled. After at least thirty years in the West it is reasonable to define the Hmong diaspora as enduring. Van Hear’s definition also allows for movement between homeland and new host country. There are indications of exchange between the ‘spatially separated populations comprising the diaspora’.<sup>24</sup>

Ang’s definition of a diaspora differs somewhat from Van Hear’s idea of a transnational community in that it does not specify the contiguous aspect he mentions. Ang talks of

the (imagined) condition of a ‘people’ dispersed throughout the world, by force or by choice. Diasporas are transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’.<sup>25</sup>

Despite varied definitions of diaspora, Clifford comments that whatever features are considered to characterise diaspora, there are no diasporic societies which satisfy all the conditions. Even the Jewish diaspora from which the language of diaspora emanates, does not provide a definitive model.<sup>26</sup> Cohen describes the Jewish diaspora and comments that in addition to the catastrophic definition of diaspora, there are earlier diasporic traditions of expansion and colonisation. He

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> I. Ang cited in R. Julian ‘Hmong transnational identity: the gendering of contested discourses.’ *Hmong Studies Journal*, 5, 2004-5, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, p. 306.

argues for a more relaxed definition to include a number of migratory patterns including those of victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural, pointing out that some groups take 'dual or multiple forms' and others change over time.<sup>27</sup>

Van Hear suggests there is a migration axis which moves from choice and more options to little choice and few options. At one end of the axis is proactive migration and at the other is reactive migration where movement is dictated by events, where there is minimal choice or planning by the people involved and where the degree of choice is severely constrained. This can be illustrated by the case of Hmong who, fearing the closure of the refugee camps and unwilling to submit to 'voluntary repatriation', sought the protection of the monks at Wat Tam Krabok in Thailand, believing that they had found a safe refuge. When the Thai government attempted to send them back across the border into Laos in 2004, their hope of a permanent home in Thailand was shattered. 15,000 were taken by the United States in 2005 and Australia offered to settle 400. Initially this was to have been in Hobart, Sydney and Melbourne, but most of the new arrivals went to Cairns, having been sponsored by relatives, thus building the number of diasporic Hmong in Australia. This example illustrates degrees of choice unavailable to another group which was to have been settled in Australia. The Thai government intervened and refused to let the group leave for the West, probably because it could have encouraged more Hmong to cross into Thailand from Laos.<sup>28</sup> It is clearly possible to place the Hmong on this axis in the area of little choice and few options: a diaspora dictated by events, in this case the communist takeover of Laos.

Van Hear also introduces the idea of migratory cultural capital, which can be explained as the accumulated experiences of migration that train a migrant in the actual processes of migration.<sup>29</sup> He includes here such things as dealing with border officials and bureaucrats, developing and maintaining contacts in receiving countries, finding accommodation and so on. It seems reasonable to add other experiences, such as avoiding the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese armies,

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<sup>27</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. x.

<sup>28</sup> Telephone conversation with former Immigration Department officer, Hobart, 7 September, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Van Hear, *New Diasporas*, p. 51.

surviving in the jungle, maintaining contact with others and negotiating life in a refugee camp as part of the Hmong migratory cultural capital. Van Hear goes on to say that diasporic populations tend to have among the most complex migration histories and to have accumulated the most substantial migratory cultural capital.<sup>30</sup> When refugees are described as survivors, I consider it reflects their accumulation of migratory cultural capital.

Another term which Van Hear uses is 're-diasporisation', which refers to the further dispersion of those already dispersed. It incorporates the notion of secondary migration, the re-grouping and enhancement of existing diasporas.<sup>31</sup> This is pertinent to the Hmong, in that groups such as the families who went first to New Zealand, then journeyed on to Australia, made a choice to re-group. This re-grouping is also visible in America where the Hmong have left places of dispersed, initial settlement and chosen to join family or clan elsewhere, or relocated for economic reasons.<sup>32</sup> It is evident from the literature that secondary migration is a common phenomenon among the Hmong and fits the description of re-diasporisation. Van Hear examines the close link between migration and globalisation, saying that migration is both a manifestation and consequence of globalisation. There is a view that, as global economic forces impact on the traditional understanding of nation states, dispersed people who develop business and cultural connections across the globe will have a growing impact on humankind's economic future.<sup>33</sup> Thomas points out that the local and global are in constant flux and with globalisation comes the creation of links where none previously existed. This results from 'the movement of people across boundaries, within cities and nations and over national boundaries' and has ramifications for the creation of transnational identities as well as economic effects.<sup>34</sup>

The idea of diasporic communities continues to occupy the interest of many writers and an whole issue of the *Asian Studies Review* is devoted to work on the diaspora of the Chinese. In this collection of articles, David Ip looks at the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.195.

<sup>32</sup> J. Bulk, 'American Hmong on the move: an explanation of very distinctive secondary migration', *Hmong Forum*, 1996, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>34</sup> M. Thomas, *Dreams in the Shadows*, Sydney, 1999, p. 101.

construction, reconstruction and negotiation of the self in diasporic communities, which he describes as complex landscapes, while Kuah-Pearce Khun Eng notes that individual social memories colour the reproduction of a collective social memory in diaspora and may differ between individuals.<sup>35</sup> This transformation and establishment of a new self-identity is very much part of diasporic communities. It is here that popular culture, such as familiar songs and literature, is counted as cultural capital, not to be confused with the concept of migratory cultural capital. This cultural capital eases the communal self into the new environment, as well as helping to construct communal identity. It seems reasonable to add food as another aspect of this, and the importance of familiar food to migrant and refugee groups is witnessed in the numerous ethnic restaurants which mirror migrant communities in Australia. Kuah Pearce notes that ritual practices also take on additional importance in diaspora.<sup>36</sup> There is strong supportive evidence for this among the Hmong. They lobbied to bring practitioners of the *qeej*, the Hmong pipes used for rituals, from the refugee camps to ensure their songs accompanied their rituals. The songs of the Hmong relate mostly to funeral practices but there are also songs which form part of the courting ritual and are played on the Jew's harp. Although to outsiders these are tunes without words, in fact they contain coded messages in a secret language, indicated by the particular notes which are played. Other secret languages are part of the cultural capital of the Hmong, albeit only practised by a small minority of the diasporic Hmong. The Hmong language itself can be considered cultural capital, and the Hmong in Tasmania went to great efforts to ensure this was not lost to their children. Ritual practices were maintained and in some cases showcased to locals at multicultural festivals and the Hmong New Year. Thirty years later, eating with the Hmong, the food is obviously still an aspect of that valued cultural capital and maintains importance in daily life and as a cherished ritual in the diaspora. Across the diaspora the cultural capital is distributed and developed to cater for the new identities which are also part of diaspora. This

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<sup>35</sup> D. Ip, 'Transnational Self in the Chinese Diaspora: A Conceptual Framework', *Asian Studies Review*, 30, 3, 2006, p. 223 and K. Kuah-Pearce, 'Locating the self in the Chinese diaspora: introductory remarks', *Asian Studies Review*, 30, 3, 2006, p. 230.

<sup>36</sup> K. Kuah-Pearce, 'Locating the self in the Chinese Diaspora: introductory remarks', *Asian Studies Review*, 30, 3, 2006, p. 231.

circulation of cultural capital is one aspect of globalisation, which influences migration and is also a result of migration.<sup>37</sup>

### **Globalisation**

It is therefore also pertinent here to examine the concept of globalisation. It represents the global implications of diaspora. When communities are scattered in diaspora, at the local level they attempt to re-identify themselves and then that re-identification takes them on a search for those others who had the same local origins but have become scattered. This can be seen as a compensation for the relinquishing of the lived certainties that Brah discusses and the attempt to construct what she calls a 'common we'.<sup>38</sup> It can be illustrated by the fact that many Hmong in the West have travelled to China to seek out Hmong whom they see as having links with common ancestors. To their chagrin they have discovered that they are unable to communicate, as their language is no longer mutually understood.<sup>39</sup>

Globalisation can be defined as 'those processes, operating on a global scale, which cut across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities, in new space-time combinations, making the world in reality and experience more interconnected.'<sup>40</sup> According to Cohen there are five aspects of globalisation which influence diasporas: a world economy, forms of international migration, the development of global cities, the creation of cosmopolitan and local cultures and a deterritorialisation of social identity. He considers these aspects open up new opportunities for diasporas to emerge, survive and flourish.<sup>41</sup>

The departure of the Hmong from Laos as a result of the war in Indo-China — a fact which places them in Cohen's victim category — has resulted in Hmong living in several countries in the West and, for the older generation

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<sup>37</sup> Van Hear, *New Diasporas*, p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, p.191.

<sup>39</sup> Personal communication, 21 April, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> S. Hall, 'The question of cultural identity', in S. Hall., D. Held and T. McGrew, eds, *Modernity and its Futures*, Cambridge, 1992, p. 309, cited in Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', in N. Tapp and G. Lee, eds., *The Hmong of Australia: Culture and Diaspora*, Canberra, 2004, p.28.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 157.

especially, the loss of family, home and place is overwhelming. Some writers comment on the gendered aspects of diaspora. For example, Clifford notes that life for women in diasporic situations can be particularly difficult. They may be struggling with the complexities of exile along with demands of family and work as well as ‘claims of old and new patriarchies’.<sup>42</sup> Certainly there are Hmong women who could claim that their lives in diaspora have presented them with such issues and an urgent need to resolve them. The Hmong diaspora is separation on a grand scale, but there has been a response to this, which has attempted to build community across the globe by establishing and developing connection with other clan and family members wherever they may be. This form of globalisation is partly a desire amongst some Hmong leaders to maintain that which distinguishes and defines Hmongness. Julian argues that ‘the success with which the Hmong are constructing a global identity suggests that the diaspora, as a form of social organisation, has the potential to transcend and succeed the nation-state, thus bridging the gap between the global and the local.’<sup>43</sup> It will be helpful here, to look at how this is happening.

In the first instance, the experience of becoming a refugee, and the offer of a durable solution in a third country, requires individuals to adapt to a new society after a period of disruption and displacement.<sup>44</sup> This adaptation requires a reconstruction of identity to include the position in which refugees find themselves. So many things have changed; the category of refugee is new and defining. Julian describes this as ‘identity work’ and considers it takes place at four levels: local, national, regional and global.<sup>45</sup> For example, at the local level there are some Hmong who attempt to maintain their cultural identity by trying to live as closely to the way they have previously lived as circumstances allow. They organise their family in traditional ways, maintaining the patriarchal relationships which are familiar to them. They rely on family and clan

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<sup>42</sup> Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, p. 314.

<sup>43</sup> Julian, ‘Living Locally, Dreaming Globally’, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 195, defines a refugee as a person who ‘owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country’.

<sup>45</sup> Julian, ‘Living Locally, Dreaming Globally’, p. 29.

connections in the traditional way and celebrate festivals which are important to them. They maintain exogamous marriage at a young age, sixteen for girls, followed by pregnancy. They grow vegetables which they are accustomed to and some kill live chickens in the back yard, or search for a place which allows them to practise customs which do not necessarily sit well with their new society. They continue the practice of animism and attempt to retain and maintain some semblance of their traditional way of life. For example, a number are market gardening using their knowledge of farming and marrying it with new varieties, methods, equipment and markets. Julian refers to this maintenance of cultural identity being encouraged in government statements on multiculturalism and mainly carried out by men.<sup>46</sup> The objective is to present themselves as Hmong to others, thus being seen as the exotic 'Other', which in Tasmania includes being seen as a marketable commodity by tourists and recorded in their holiday pictures. This was particularly evident at Salamanca Market and other smaller markets around town. In observing the Tasmanian Hmong it appears, to a large extent, that it is the women who maintain the cultural practices within the family, reminding members of how things were. For example, it is common for the women to practise traditional herbal remedies. In many cases the reasons for particular practices are lost but the practices are maintained nevertheless, in the attempt to remain authentically Hmong. It seems that the extent to which traditions are practised is often a function of age and previous knowledge of culture learned from elders.

At the national level, 'identity work' includes being seen as a Hmong Australian or an Australian Hmong. I consider that to a certain extent this is bound up with the issue of language. To claim to be Australian but not to be able to speak English, suggests that an individual cannot fully participate in Australian society or have equal access to goods and services. To be an Australian, a Hmong must reject practices, such as polygamy, which may have been acceptable in certain circumstances in Laos, but are illegal in Australia. The practice of traditional shamanistic healing and other traditional healing does not necessarily sit comfortably with being an Australian and the Hmong have been very adept at

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

mixing Western medicine with their own practices. This was observed in the maternity area in Hobart, where Hmong women gave birth squatting in the traditional posture but in modern birthing facilities. They ate foods traditionally considered appropriate to their condition, prepared and supplied by relatives, rather than hospital food which did not satisfy the traditional dietary requirements for women who had just given birth. They left hospital as soon as possible and returned home to follow traditional post-natal practices, such as wearing woollen hats and socks to retain body heat and binding their stomachs.

At a regional level, the Hmong are often classed with other Asians and this is not always an advantage in a country which demonstrates many racist attitudes. However, the Hmong are a small minority in Australia and the old adage of 'safety in numbers' suggests that aligning themselves with other Lao and even other Asians is politic on occasions. The number of Hmong in Australia is growing and the new intake of Hmong from Wat Tam Krabok in Thailand, whilst small, is further increasing their presence. The greatest increase is by birth of a new generation, and the maintenance of Hmong identity appears to be less important to them than to their parents. Smith-Heffner discusses the cultural discontinuities faced by Khmer children in American schools, and the reconstruction of a Khmer identity which creates tension between Buddhist ideals and everyday practice and the different social and moral values of those around them.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the Hmong, the tradition is not Buddhist, although they have come from a country which is predominantly Buddhist, but the attempt to reconstruct an identity in a new country is the same, and young Hmong face the same cultural discontinuities.

It is at the global level that the issue of being Hmong becomes particularly interesting. It is clear that there is a concerted effort on the part of individuals and organisations to maintain a sense of being Hmong.<sup>48</sup> There is a considerable amount of literature coming from America, which crosses national divides and promotes Hmong culture and the maintenance of being Hmong. Hmong associations, Hmong literature, both in English and Hmong, Hmong publications,

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<sup>47</sup> N. Smith-Heffner, *Khmer American*, Berkeley, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', p. 40.

and conferences on Hmong, link Hmong around the world, which can be regarded as part of the effort ‘to construct a unified Hmong identity at this level’.<sup>49</sup> The electronic media allow Hmong to make contact with relatives, clan members and others across national boundaries. International travel, made possible by obtaining Australian citizenship and an Australian passport, or passports from other countries as the case may be, enables Hmong to visit family members from whom they were separated when they were resettled from the refugee camps. They can visit Laos to meet family and clan members they left behind and go to China to trace their roots. Travel, and the financial ability to undertake it, also gives opportunities to meet up with previously unknown clan members all over the world. Hmong videos circulate the globe and are shown in Hmong homes worldwide along with tapes of traditional Hmong folk songs and pipe music. In a Hmong village in northern Laos, when I searched for the *qeej* player whose music could be heard across the valley, it transpired that the player was an American Hmong and the music was on a tape from America!<sup>50</sup> This ‘cross-fertilisation’ maintains ties of kin, develops new relationships and promotes a sense of being Hmong in a global context. Importantly, Gary Lee argues that ‘the overall global Hmong identity is greater than its many local differences and groups.’<sup>51</sup>

Julian regards characteristics of the global Hmong identity narrative as the ‘quintessential ‘refugee’ story’. The story incorporates various themes: the war and the military; the refugee experience; continuity with the past through recognition of the value of clan ties and ‘traditional’ Hmong culture, and symbols of movement into the future.<sup>52</sup> A number of unpublished stories told by adult Hobart Hmong and school children over the years, focussed on the part they had played in the war and their wartime experiences.<sup>53</sup> The Hmong in America carry this even further, reminding the Americans how they depended on the Hmong during the Secret War; how the Hmong provided food and shelter for the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Personal visit to Hmong village, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> G. Lee, ‘Culture and Settlement: The Present Situation of the Hmong in Australia’, in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong in Australia*, p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> Julian, ‘Living Locally, Dreaming Globally’, p. 41.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Y.P. Chang, *Yang Pao’s story*, Hobart, 1989.

Americans; how they put themselves in danger for the Americans; how many of their number died in the war, (more Hmong than Americans); and how they all suffered in the aftermath. The story in America usually quotes their leader General Vang Pao, who still has considerable influence over the American Hmong.<sup>54</sup> General Vang Pao is much admired in Australia also. One informant said ‘He will always influence people. People here still look up to him and respect him as a great leader. He united the Hmong and gave them meaning for living.’<sup>55</sup>

This continued respect for Vang Pao shows how his influence survives in the diaspora. The other ‘hero’ is Dr Yang Dao, a Hmong who received his education in France and was the first Hmong to obtain a PhD, but now lives in America and represents the potential for attaining the Hmong American ‘dream’ through education. For Westerners the most visual evidence of this refugee story is in the ‘whispering cloths’, the story cloths or *pa’n dau*, which have been sold throughout the Hmong diaspora. These are not traditional Hmong work but build on traditional needlework skills, and were developed as a money raising venture in the refugee camps and sold in the West to generate income for those remaining in the camps. They depict the village existence of the Hmong in Laos and some show the disruption of the war, with chemical rain and bombings. They show the exodus from Laos and horrors of the Mekong crossing and existence in the camps. Some are less confronting and detail village life, folk stories and some even have English script to accompany the pictures. This latter group illustrates the memory of life before the war and that unified Hmong identity which many writers try to perpetuate in the phenomenon of globalisation. The embroideries brought the story of the Hmong out of Indo-China to a world that had little idea of what had happened to them in the Secret War. These visual statements gave an identity to the Hmong and made others take notice. They also represent the two-way nature of globalisation.

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<sup>54</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*, p. 218.

<sup>55</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.



Hmong *pa'n dau* stitched in a Thai refugee camp and sold in Hobart.

Artist unknown.

The theme common to the global Hmong identity, therefore, is that of the refugee experience, including the escape through the jungle, crossing the Mekong River to reach Thailand, obtaining refugee status and life in the refugee camps. Listening to my informants it is clear there are individual variations on the theme as previously mentioned, but the following are typical of the narratives. Some tell of how their livestock followed them into the jungle, dogs, cattle, ponies and even chickens, and how they had to be killed so as not to give away the location of those who were escaping. Others tell how the elderly sick urged their families to leave them behind so they could flee more quickly. Some tell of Hmong babies who were drugged with opium so they would not cry and reveal where the families were and of those who received an overdose and never woke up. This refugee narrative tells of eating leaves and roots when food supplies ran out. The stories of crossing the Mekong are horrific in some cases, where family members could not swim and became separated from those supporting them and drowned. Both Pathet Lao troops, Vietnamese troops and in some cases Thai troops and bandits, fired on the escapees and, once on the other side of the river, they were subject to rough treatment and theft from Thai guards and others. Life in Ban Vinai refugee camp has been described in detail by Lynellen Long.<sup>56</sup> Other camps were no different. Whatever the variations, the refugee experience is an obligatory part of the narrative.

Julian notes that the identity narrative attempts to retain 'Hmongness', yet includes new influences on their lives, derived from their situation as Hmong in a new environment.<sup>57</sup> Part of this theme is the maintenance of 'traditional' Hmong practices in an alien society: burying their dead in customary ways with the body on display in the home for at least three days; marrying at a much younger age than others in their new society; returning to Laos or Thailand to find a husband or wife; practising shamanism, an essential part of their animistic religion and their treatment of illness; attempting to maintain the gender and family relationships as they were in Laos. The distinctive costumes are part of the

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<sup>56</sup> L. Long, *Ban Vinai. The refugee camp*, New York, 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', p.45.

tradition too, but in their new countries the Hmong do not wear them as everyday garments. Rather they bring them out for festivals and rituals and occasions when they wish to affirm their Hmongness. Whilst, traditionally, the costumes identified clan and grouping, now they are part of the reinvention of tradition.<sup>58</sup>

Globalisation of the Hmong culture has provided opportunity for change in Hmong costume, which is now more of a fashion statement, with identifying clan costumes giving way to, for example, costumes from China being mixed with hats from Laos, pockets from America, sashes from Thailand and Western accessories, contributions from friends and relatives around the world.<sup>59</sup> When attending Hmong New Year celebrations near Luang Prabang in 2004, I noticed that young Hmong boys in Laos sometimes only wear part of the traditional costume which is usually made from fabric from China or Thailand, spike their hair with gel and wear trendy ‘shades’, while the girls carry plastic handbags and wear platform soles, and the fabrics used for their costumes are mostly synthetics imported from overseas. In Phonsavan, in Xieng Khouang Province, I found a Hmong couple making costumes for export to the United States, suggesting that even the Hmong in Laos have become part of the globalisation of costumes that Wronska-Friend identifies.

Of her research in Cairns, Innisfail and Yunnan, Wronska-Friend writes that, ‘The Hmong costume adorns and protects, but also sends subliminal messages about its owner’s gender, group membership, locality, marital status and so on.’<sup>60</sup> It also encodes cultural principles. By analysing the costumes it is possible to understand the social changes experienced at a regional and global level.<sup>61</sup> In the Hmong diaspora, the costume has less significance and globally there is a loss of the meaning formerly attributed to costume.

Wronska-Friend considers that the Hmong embroidery described earlier, which often included scenes of the atrocities experienced by the Hmong in Laos, may have acted as a catharsis for those violent memories.<sup>62</sup> For many this activity was one of the first steps in their exposure to globalisation. Money from the West

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<sup>58</sup> M. Wronska-Friend. ‘Globalised Threads’ in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong in Australia*, p. 116.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

flowed from the sale of these items, allowing the camp Hmong to purchase additional items to improve their situation. Once the Hmong arrived in their new homes in the West, the creation of this work and of traditional costumes virtually ceased as they were too involved in the business and stress of settlement. When Sara Lindsay curated an exhibition titled 'Tradition, Cloth, Meaning – Contemporary Textiles' in 1995, there was only one Hmong woman in Hobart still actively involved in making *pa'n dau*. Lou Xiong's embroidery, given the title 'People of Laos', was included in the exhibition.<sup>63</sup> These embroideries represent a move to responding to an international market, and a blurring of clan boundaries in order to create global items that tell of the generalised Hmong refugee experience. In the diaspora, the Hmong rarely have time to continue this work. However, production has been picked up by enterprising Hmong in Laos, most of whom were never refugees, and they are producing items popular with tourists, and thus demonstrating another example of Hmong globalisation.

The Hmong of Laos cannot avoid the 'progress' which is influenced by global connections, and in many cases have taken it on board enthusiastically as indicated above. In a small craft market near the main post office in Vientiane, some enterprising Hmong have established small booths where internet and associated technology provide opportunities for their clients to chat to relatives in the United States, for example. The globalisation of the Hmong is also well-demonstrated in some villages where particular brick houses with tin roofs stand out from the other wooden or bamboo-sided, thatched homes. The former have been built with money sent by relatives from overseas. Money moves across the world as those of the diaspora continue to support relatives in Thailand and Laos, and they, in turn, send clothing and costumes in appreciation of financial support. It is within these contexts that the diasporic Hmong, and those who remain, have attempted to build a global community to add meaning to their circumstances and to link the local with the world-wide Hmong community.

It can be argued that globalisation for the Hmong began with their interaction with the French administration, which introduced them to a different

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<sup>63</sup> It had previously been shown at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in 'Colonial Pastime to Contemporary Profession -150 Years of Australian Women's Art', 1995.

system of administration, new allegiances and opportunities for further trade in opium. Additionally, I would argue that the Secret War was a potent exposure to globalisation. As noted in the previous chapter, many Hmong were allied with the CIA and became part of the American military machine. In three days they were trained to use machine guns, the weapons of a foreign power. The longer they remained involved, the more dependent they became on the Americans for the basic necessities of life and the less able to maintain their traditional way of life. Families were without men to maintain their farms; villages lost a proportion of their inhabitants, supposedly ten Hmong for every American killed; women and children became 'camp followers' rather than remain in villages populated by women, children, the elderly and the injured. In some shape or form, the Hmong were all affected and dislocated by this exposure to a military aspect of globalisation. As mentioned previously, some Hmong fought on the side of the Pathet Lao, in opposition to those Hmong who fought with the CIA.

Life as a refugee, the fate of many Hmong, meant relocation to a second country, albeit a neighbour sharing a common border. The exposure to globalisation was inevitable. Despite being 'between countries', in a suspended reality, they were subject to laws of another sovereign state and to the jurisdiction of the United Nations. Refugee workers came from many countries, as did funding for the maintenance of the camps. The administration, whilst taking into consideration Hmong culture, operated camps for more than one nationality and focused primarily on survival. Accommodation was basic and did not replicate traditional Hmong villages. The refugees were employed to fulfil tasks new to them. In some cases these tasks introduced them to foreigners who were able to advise them about procedures for relocation to third countries. The Hmong depended on relatives overseas to provide money to purchase medicine and other necessities. Through these relatives they also obtained information about resettlement and other related matters. It can be argued therefore, that by creating these connections world-wide, the refugee camps put in place further groundwork for the globalisation of the diasporic Hmong.

With the disappearance of many Hmong traditions, and the loss of interest of younger Hmong in practising those traditions, there are moves to mobilise

Hmong around the world. Much of the rhetoric emerges from the United States, but Dr Pao Saykao from Melbourne has been quoted as saying:

Now the pressure is on us to prepare the next generation – to instill [sic] in them all that they need to be Hmong and more – this includes our beliefs, our norms, our religious practices, our languages and all the different aspects of our culture and our dreams. This is a task that is not only challenging but pressing. And we no longer have time or the luxury to procrastinate anymore.<sup>64</sup>

This mobilisation takes an interesting turn when Pao calls for the creation of the world's first virtual nation. He sees this as a means of preserving Hmongness. He says:

If we cannot all be at one place at one time, we can still be together on this Earth as a nation of a virtual community – a Hmong Virtual Nation – ruled by a truly democratically elected Hmong from all over the world whose vision is to enhance the lives of our people and to elevate the status of our people in the areas of economics and education, to become a global citizen and to be part of this new emerging global community no matter where the Hmong may live on this earth. The issue of a virtual nation is not new and in the age of cyberspace, it is no longer an impossible dream....<sup>65</sup>

There is an irony here with the juxtaposition of a virtual global community and the fact that many of the Hmong in Asia still live without access to basic amenities and, apart from some urbanised Hmong, few have access to the technological facilities needed to create a virtual nation. Such a development would depend on the younger generation of diasporic Hmong and they are the very people who, for the most part, seem to have little interest in preserving Hmong traditions. A further irony is the use of modern technology in a bid to preserve old traditions.

Downman believes that there is an intrinsic link between culture, religion and language for the Hmong. If any of these facets are changed or threatened, there is a ripple effect which is felt by the whole community.<sup>66</sup> He goes on to say that modernisation and globalisation have caused unique aspects of Hmong

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<sup>64</sup> P. Saykao, cited in S. Downman, 'Intra-Ethnic Conflict and the Hmong in Australia and Thailand', unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, p. 318.

<sup>65</sup> P. Saykao, 'The Roots and the Fruits: Hmong identity in the future', A keynote speech presented at the 7<sup>th</sup> Hmong National Conference, Milwaukee, April 14 -16, 2002, p. 34.

<sup>66</sup> Downman, 'Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong', p. 224.

culture to be forgotten in a generation, affecting traditional kinship and social functions. He quotes Pastor Toua, the former pastor of the Cairns Christian Hmong, who considers that the Hmong in Australia have forgotten their traditions and no longer know who they are.<sup>67</sup> The orchestrated move to Brisbane, part of the secondary migration of the Hmong from Tasmania and other states, intended to create a larger, more recognisable community where tradition and culture could be taught, may well be too late.

Before leaving the topic of globalisation and the Hmong, it is important to look at another paradigm, the idea of transnational social spaces. This is understood as 'relatively permanent flows of people, goods and services across international borders that tie stayers and movers and corresponding networks, regulated by emigration and immigration state policies.'<sup>68</sup> This process exists alongside the maintenance of the nation state and takes into consideration the distinctive characteristics of settlement. This concept is particularly relevant in the case of the Hmong of the diaspora. In French Guyana for example, the Hmong have replicated villages similar to those in Laos and make their living from farming and travel transnational social space to France and America.<sup>69</sup> In Germany the Hmong are few and they have intermarried with locals and are not viable as a Hmong community. They too have journeyed across transnational social space to France and America.<sup>70</sup> Such communities are not necessarily homogeneous however. In the USA, the earlier Hmong arrivals were the political and military elite, some of whom left in the CIA airlift from Long Cheng and spent little time in refugee camps. Later Hmong refugees to the United States were similar to those who came to Tasmania, the foot soldiers of General Vang Pao, who had spent up to fifteen years in refugee camps. Their levels of education were generally lower and in Australia they have formed a more homogeneous group than in the USA. There, the 'significant class and status

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> T. Faist, *The volume and dynamics of international migration and transnational social spaces*, Oxford, 2000, cited in R. Julian, 'Hmong transnational identity: the gendering of contested discourses', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2004-05, 5, p. 7.

<sup>69</sup> Clarkin, 'Hmong resettlement in French Guiana', p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Yang, 'Hmong of Germany', p. 11.

differences' are apparent, as they are in the diaspora elsewhere.<sup>71</sup> Another difference between the USA and Australia is the proportion of Hmong who have become Christian. Julian notes that only a small minority in Australia are Christian and, in general, the Australian Hmong are viewed as more conservative than those in other countries of resettlement.<sup>72</sup>

It is Julian's view that the clan ties which have developed between the United States and Australia constitute a transnational community. There are also indications of links across a transnational social space between Hmong in Asia and those who have settled in the First World.<sup>73</sup> As Julian points out, this can be influenced by geographical location. It was possibly lack of geographical knowledge of Australia which explains the surprise of some participants at the Hmong in America Conference in 1995, in response to my paper on the Tasmanian Hmong.<sup>74</sup> Many were unaware of the existence of a Hmong community in Tasmania and unaware of the existence of Tasmania itself. Julian comments on her own shock at seeing such a large number of Hmong delegates at that same conference.<sup>75</sup> Julian notes, as does Brah, that diasporas are not unified or homogenous, any more than other cultures or communities, despite attempts to create a 'common we'.<sup>76</sup>

Cohen argues that it is difficult to establish a direct causal link between globalisation and diasporisation. Indeed diasporas preceded globalisation by thousands of years. Whilst they are separate phenomena, there is an observable fit between them and diasporas benefit from aspects of globalisation and bridge the gap between the local and the global.<sup>77</sup> As to the Hmong, this theoretical examination of diaspora and globalisation places their movement from Laos and later from the refugee camps of Thailand into a context, part of the grid of migration into which many refugee groups fit. It shows that initial exodus is often followed by further journeys, so it should come as no surprise to discover that the

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<sup>71</sup> Julian, 'Hmong transnational identity', p. 6.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9, and M. Eldridge, *New Mountain, New River, New Home? The Hmong in Tasmania*, paper presented at the Hmong in America Conference, St Paul, Minnesota, 6-8 April, 1995.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>76</sup> Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', p.28.

<sup>77</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 176.

Hmong community of Tasmania undertook a secondary migration to Queensland. This phenomenon is also evident in the United States where the Hmong have left areas to which they were first designated and moved to places where welfare arrangements are superior or where appropriate employment or training opportunities exist.<sup>78</sup> In French Guiana, there is regular movement between the province and mainland France, for the purpose of study, marriage or employment.<sup>79</sup>

The Hmong of Tasmania have demonstrated the characteristics by which authors define diaspora, such as retention of a collective memory of a homeland, an interweaving of multiple journeys, partial alienation from the host society and a determination to create new identities. They have even extended this concept to aim for virtual identities. They have also participated in the globalised journeys and connections which link them with Hmong throughout the world. They have visited family members in America and France; returned to Laos to their villages; connected with Hmong in Thailand, both at Wat Tham Krabok and in Hmong areas of Thailand, gone overseas to obtain traditional healing and attempted to trace their roots in China. They are making a success of globalisation, to the extent that their transnational efforts to create a global identity suggest a new form of social organisation, transcending concepts of border and the nation-state.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Bulk, 'American Hmong on the move', p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Clarkin, 'Hmong Resettlement in French Guiana', p.5.

<sup>80</sup> Julian, 'Living Locally, Dreaming Globally', p. 27.

## Chapter 3

### Settlement and support

We were welcomed to Hobart and it felt as if I was a bird which had been let out of its cage. The weather was good and the growing conditions too.<sup>1</sup>

The Hmong, like all newly arrived refugees, were dependent on the assistance offered by a variety of government departments and voluntary groups. In examining the support available to the Hmong when they arrived in Tasmania, this chapter investigates whether that support was adequate for their needs as newly arrived migrants and in the longer term as they became part of the local community. Perceived lack of adequate support for migrants has the potential to cause them to leave and join more supportive communities, often seeking out people of the same ethnicity to provide the assistance which is lacking from others. A number of refugees to Tasmania, the Vietnamese and Sudanese for example, have left soon after resettlement, for the mainland of Australia, believing they would find better support from relatives, friends or countrymen living in the relevant ethnic communities in the bigger capital cities. The chapter also examines whether there were any changes in bureaucratic and organisational procedures required, when dealing with a largely pre-literate community. These changes will be taken as a measure of willingness to accommodate the new arrivals. Individuals who worked with the Hmong professionally and voluntarily will be the 'voices' that describe the assistance offered to the Hmong and complement the voices of the Hmong themselves included in this thesis.

The Hmong entered Tasmania under the humanitarian visa category which meant they came initially to join relatives who sponsored them. The existing Hmong community raised a large sum of money to bring the next cohort to Tasmania. Unlike the Vietnamese refugees who arrived under a refugee visa category, with the government paying for their relocation, the Hmong did not go to a migrant hostel but were accommodated by relatives or clan members. This placed great strain on those welcoming families who were often fairly recent

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<sup>1</sup> Hmong woman, F14, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

arrivals themselves and had not had time to come to terms with the Australian way of doing things, and local expectations. They were not, therefore, in the best situation to assist newly arrived relatives who often had large families of small children, or to cope with their settlement needs. This meant that in some cases inaccurate settlement information was given by supporting Hmong, and important information was not handed on to the newly arrived families. However, the additional support available from government agencies ensured that these oversights were rectified. One example of this was when a young man was brought for enrolment at AMES, whereas his age suggested that Elizabeth College, a senior secondary college would offer more appropriate education with students of his own age.<sup>2</sup>

Using the term pre-literate for the Hmong is not to suggest that all of those who arrived in Tasmania were unable to read and write in their own language or completely unfamiliar with the concept of communication through the written word. The term was used in relation to teaching the Hmong English, to indicate that many of the Hmong had had little exposure to the written word and lived largely without reference to their own script. For many their first written script was English, which they learned after arriving in Tasmania. Hmong language was first recorded in Laos in written form in 1953 by a group of missionaries. There had been about fourteen previous attempts to develop a writing system for the Hmong language over the previous one hundred years. The Romanized Popular Alphabet [RPA] script of 1953 is used by the Hmong of the diaspora and was devised from the various Hmong dialects. There is also a writing system developed in the 1960s, known as Pahawh Hmong.<sup>3</sup> A messianic religious movement has grown up around the so-called prophet Shong Lue Yang and this writing system, which he developed. He claimed it was given to him by God as proof of him being the chosen messiah. The development of this writing system is indeed remarkable, since he was a non-literate villager who worked without outside help to create a credible system encoding his language. Within Laos a script similar to Lao is used by those Hmong able to read and write in their own

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<sup>2</sup> Personal recollection as the educational counsellor at AMES.

<sup>3</sup> L. Vang and J. Lewis, *Grandmother's Path, Grandfather's Way*, Rancho Cordova, 1990, p. 4.

language. Despite RPA being written from 1953 onwards, many of the Hobart Hmong had not had access to the newly transcribed language and, in many cases, they had not had access to formal education of any kind. If they had any English it had been acquired in the army or in the refugee camps under fairly basic circumstances and, in some cases, developed as they worked for camp officials or assisted as interpreters. Some older men had learnt to read and write as military scribes during the Secret War.<sup>4</sup>

### **Education**

After their arrival in Tasmania it was clear that the adults needed English language in order to participate in their new environment and to access goods and services. In addition, those Hmong who had some English needed their skills upgraded, especially writing skills. English language programs were set up post WWII, commencing in Tasmania in 1948, which aimed to assist migrants attain at least survival level English and to prepare them to participate in Australian society and in the workforce. For many of the Hmong, the classes at the Adult Migrant English Centre offered their first experience of a classroom and formalised study. ‘It was the first time I had touched a pencil instead of farm tools’, said one older Hmong woman, now living in Innisfail.<sup>5</sup> Some of the younger men had attended primary school, but few of the women had. It was therefore important that English lessons be offered in a non-threatening environment and Hmong-specific classes were arranged, since the language needs and educational experience of the Hmong were different from most of the other clients. Teaching programs were devised to take account of the lack of classroom experience, and the Hmong’s little (or no) familiarity with the written word. Hmong-specific teaching materials were created to cater for the needs of this group. A small number of teachers became familiar with the particular needs of Hmong and specialised in teaching them. Diana Roberts, then Levett, was particularly sensitive to their needs and taught the Hmong at Moonah at the Salvation Army Citadel, where crèche facilities were available on site, and at Bowen Road School. The principal there welcomed the

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<sup>4</sup> J. Duffy, ‘Literacy and L’Armée Clandestine: The Writing of the Hmong Military Scribes’, *Hmong Studies Journal*, 3, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Older Hmong woman, F16, interviewed Innisfail, 23 August, 2005.

classes as they helped to integrate the adult Hmong into the school community. This was the first time classes had been held in the suburbs where the migrants lived, apart from on-site classes for the Vietnamese at the Migrant Hostel. Diana commented,

We were thrown in at the deep end. There was minimal professional development that was relevant. That was when I discovered there were no suitable materials. I realised then that you needed to listen to what was worrying them [the Hmong]. You can easily do that and make a mini-lesson from it. You had to befriend them. By chance I started to teach them with chants and rhymes and it became a fun thing. We did a lot of role play especially about meeting people. It was the first step at listening to others [in English]. It was important to laugh at ourselves. It was different from teaching the Vietnamese. The Hmong were living in houses and [carrying out] market-gardening, so we focussed on that. There was something natural about working with them and building on their experiences. Having an interpreter was a new aspect to teaching for me. It was wonderful to have them and they learned a few things too. I could judge from the interpreter's reaction whether I was on the right track.<sup>6</sup>

Use of an interpreter-cum-teachers' aide was a new departure for the Adult Migrant English Programme and was a change in delivery in response to an obvious need.

It was not only teaching programmes that had to be devised. The logistics of getting the Hmong to the English centre, and providing child-care also required some lateral thinking. Some of the Hmong families had several children under school age. In some cases one parent attended class in the morning and the other in the afternoon which created timetabling issues for staff. In other cases parents attended in the morning while grandparents cared for the children and they reversed the procedure in the afternoon. Childcare was organised on site as it had been for the Vietnamese at the migrant hostel, but it was the first time this had been done at the centre and Hmong childcare assistants were used. At Benjafield Childcare Centre, near where many of the Hmong lived, an arrangement was made to care for the children of parents attending English classes, and Hmong childcare workers provided cultural information for those Tasmanian workers who had never cared for Hmong children before. At one stage the Hmong and

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<sup>6</sup> Diana Roberts, interviewed Hobart, 6 July 2006.

their children were bussed to the Adult Migrant English centre in Hobart, another innovation. 'Bussing was a foolish mistake' said Diana Roberts, who later taught at the city AMES centres. 'There were too many little children and some of the women were pregnant. Later they had to use public transport and it was such a struggle for them.'<sup>7</sup> The reason for the bussing and, later, expecting the Hmong to travel by public transport, was supposedly to give them access to all the facilities available at the main centre and to ensure they had the same opportunities as other migrants attending English classes. It was a policy decision which made things difficult for the Hmong because of their particular situation. It was a demonstration of their enthusiasm that many of them made that effort because it was very stressful for them. There were incidents where bus drivers would not stop for them or abused them, leaving them stranded at the bus-stop with children and pushers. This upset both them and their teachers and resulted in discussions with the Metropolitan Transport Trust in an effort to rectify the situation. In addition AMES clients did not qualify for student concessions on buses which concerned them and their teachers because of the weekly cost of transport.<sup>8</sup>

The Home Tutor Scheme of the Adult Migrant English Programme provided assistance with English at home for those, such as pregnant women or those with several pre-school age children, who found it too difficult to get to classes. Home tutors supported the Hmong in many practical ways in addition to helping with English. It was a new experience for most home tutors to work with pre-literate people. Some of the Hmong men found English very difficult to master and in some cases it was felt that this related to their wartime experiences. It was hard for them to concentrate and there were conceptual difficulties which they found hard to come to terms with. There was no referral service for survivors of torture and trauma or those suffering from post-traumatic stress at that stage. Teachers had to contend with this issue and, for those who had not taught the Vietnamese, this was confronting. Diana Roberts commented that the Vietnamese were suffering post-traumatic stress to a greater degree because their escape experiences were more recent and included the children.<sup>9</sup> The Hmong had mostly spent many years in a

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Personal recollection.

<sup>9</sup> Diana Roberts, interviewed Hobart, 6 July, 2006.

refugee camp and many of the children were born there, allowing them to put some of the memories behind them to a greater extent than the Vietnamese. However it became clear that life in the refugee camps had been very stressful, in many cases had added to the trauma already experienced and had presented many challenges to the Hmong. As with the Vietnamese, and all refugees, the loss of their country, family members, possessions, homes and friends was life-changing. The men, especially the older ones, did not all find it easy to make the adjustment to their new home and circumstances. As one man said, 'My father never recovered from the experience. He never got over leaving Laos. He just went fishing.'<sup>10</sup> The women were particularly eager students and were very anxious to be able to communicate effectively, which was strong motivation for them. It was the women who interacted with the public at Salamanca Market, the Saturday market popular with tourists and other visitors. It was also the women who interacted with the staff and parents at the schools and childcare centres attended by their children.

The school-aged children were enrolled at several local schools.<sup>11</sup> Specialist English as a Second Language teachers were available to provide on-arrival English programs and assist in mainstreaming Hmong students when they were ready. Cultural awareness programs were organised to provide teachers with professional development relating to Hmong culture, customs, language and learning needs. Marie Dungey was Principal Education Officer for English as a Second Language from 1980 until her retirement in 1999. She feels she was thrown in at the deep end as far as the Hmong were concerned. She approached AMES, the Tasmanian Association for Multi-cultural Education (TASame) which was the professional body for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, the Migrant Resource Centre and the Network for Intercultural Communication (NIC) to seek assistance in providing suitable services for Hmong children. Marie had previously taught at Bowen Road Primary School and Vue and Chue Thaow's children (the first Hmong children to arrive in Hobart) were amongst her students. She had great support from Vue Thaow. When asked in her interview how the

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<sup>10</sup> Hmong man, M1, interviewed Hobart, 21 April, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> East Moonah Kindergarten, Bowen Road Primary School, Springfield Primary School, New Town Boys' High School, Ogilvie Girls' High School and Elizabeth College.

system supported the Hmong, she listed numerous changes which had to be implemented, as will be seen.

All new arrivals received limited government funding for English assistance but this did not apply to children born in Australia so, as the Australian-born Hmong children entered school, there was no specific funding to cater for the additional needs they had. In addition to professional development for ESL teachers, primary and secondary teachers who had never encountered the Hmong before also needed assistance. Constant talking to other teachers was encouraged and problem solving sessions were arranged. Marie tried to show teachers what skills the Hmong children had, rather than submitting to a deficit model where the migrant was seen as deficient. She gave the example of taking a Grade 10 Hmong boy to a science lesson and getting him to write on the whiteboard to overcome the impression that he had no skills. Hmong boys at New Town High School wrote their stories. These were printed and distributed to school libraries and altered the perception some people had of the Hmong. Marie also bought embroideries by Hmong needlewoman, Lou Xiong, depicting the story of the Hmong escape to Thailand. She put these in schools where the details of the persecution of the Hmong, and their escape to Thailand, could challenge people. Marie took Lou to Springfield Primary School where she did sewing with the children. Marie described it as 'very special'. As she put it, 'These embroideries said 'these people have literacy'.'<sup>12</sup> Two were purchased for the head office of the Education Department, so they could be seen by department staff and visitors. There was an unexpected problem with underclothing, which had not been experienced in schools before. Some Hmong children did not wear underclothes and Vue Thaow was asked to help. Marie bought lots of underwear and distributed them to the families. Sonia Broadstock, the Multicultural Education Officer, made a film on behalf of the Education Department, to help the Hmong families in their settlement. It looked at some of the settlement issues and adaptations the Hmong needed to make in order to live safely and successfully in Tasmania. This was another innovation.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

‘We liaised very closely with families in their homes’ Marie explained. ‘On one occasion I said to them [Hmong parents] ‘This child is only thirteen and she cannot get married.’ We were losing quite a lot of girls at Ogilvie [High School] who showed promise.’ Some young Hmong were married while still at high school and, when the girls became pregnant, they withdrew. In such cases they were encouraged to undertake Distance Education in order to complete Year 10. I was involved in providing tuition at home for two such students. Having babies so young precluded them from school, but considerable effort was made to encourage them to continue their education.

We got a few through to Elizabeth College [Senior Secondary College]. Boys continued but girls didn’t. Girls had Friday off to pick the vegetables [for sale at Salamanca Market]. We had never had older children who had no concept of marks on paper having meaning. It was a learning experience for us all. We lived day-by-day dealing with problems and had round table conferences with Vue and Xao [Thaow)]. We used interpreters professionally and paid them direct [from ESL Program funding]. We had to educate schools to make use of interpreters appropriately and ensure they were paid properly.<sup>13</sup>

Another change which required negotiation was with the Schools Board.

After negotiations with TASSAB [Tasmanian Secondary Schools Assessment Board], Hmong students sitting HSC language-based examinations were allowed a ‘human dictionary’, because there was no Hmong dictionary.<sup>14</sup> During the 1990s refugees from many countries were granted extra time and use of a dictionary. We employed Hmong aides at East Moonah Kindergarten and Bowen Road Primary School. This was to give employment and act as role models and bridge makers. We employed as many as we could, those with skills and confidence.<sup>15</sup>

This bridging function was particularly important when the Immigration Department ceased to employ social workers.

When asked whether the ‘powers that be’ were sympathetic, Marie said that most were, although it was hard to access the higher echelons. ‘I had to persist and one thing I did was to confront them with other scripts [as a cultural

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> In this situation a human dictionary is an individual who explains English words to Hmong exam candidates in the absence of an English-Hmong, Hmong-English dictionary.

<sup>15</sup> Marie Dungey, interviewed Margate, 3 April, 2006.

awareness exercise at professional development]. I'd say "Do your own work! No talking!" It depends on your personality as a trainer.' This technique was used at a number of professional development training sessions and forced participants to experience what it is like to be asked to fill out a form when you have no English and no concept of form-filling. Marie was also involved with the establishment of the Hmong School, a Saturday ethnic school, where Hmong adults taught Hmong language, and cultural knowledge was handed on. It was set up with Commonwealth and State Government Ethnic Schools funding and the same was done for the Bosnian and the Chilean refugees. The Hmong Ethnic School became the largest in Hobart. One Hmong man said that the children who attended Hmong school in Hobart have the advantage of being able to write and read Hmong but that is not true of the Hmong children from Melbourne and Sydney.<sup>16</sup> 'We ran holiday programs for children at Bowen Road School for those who had been here less than two years. Sonia Broadstock, a Multicultural Education Officer was employed to run the holiday program'.<sup>17</sup>

East Moonah Kindergarten and Child-care Centre took the bulk of the younger children and innovative programs were organised there as well. Hmong teacher-aides were appointed and older Hmong joined in classes and established a vegetable garden in the grounds, enabling the children to see something familiar in their new environment. In this and other ways, Tasmanian children were exposed to Hmong culture. Helen Lemer, the former Director of Child-care and Teacher-in-charge at the kindergarten, first encountered the Hmong when she taught Vue and Chue Thaow's son, Chanh Peng, but encountered no difficulties until more Hmong arrived later on.

There was no funding even when we had a lot of Hmong. We eventually got a grant from District Office [Education Department] to fund 8 hours of aide assistance and employed Hmong who I trained with the help of others. One aide, Ge Thaow was very alert, could understand English, fitted in and was very unobtrusive. He could read well which helped a lot; a tower of strength, gentle and quiet. Non-Hmong children responded to him so he helped with integration and contributed so much. It was like having another teacher in the room.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hmong man M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Marie Dungey, interviewed Margate, 3 April, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Helen Lemer, interviewed Hobart, 27 March, 2006.

The aides also helped with communication between home and school and for the first time Hmong parents became members of the Management Committee. As a result of this innovative program, the Immigration Department asked if teachers from other refugee communities could have classroom experience at East Moonah Kindergarten.

When asked about other changes at the kindergarten, Helen Lemer recalled

They were developments rather than changes. Staff members changed the home corner and added Asian dolls purchased in Sydney. The Hmong mothers made Hmong clothes for them. I bought books with Asian people and animals in them and used baskets for storage as they were familiar with baskets.

Helen noted that the Hmong children had exceptional fine motor skills.

I had to extend the normal activities. For example we used finer wool, cotton and needles, pencils and crayons than usual. We introduced a wok into the home corner and the whole school was involved in this kind of change. The other children were influenced by the exceptional artistic skills of the Hmong children. These four-year-old children were brilliant.

Everything was done to make them feel welcome.

Language-wise we encouraged them to speak Hmong whilst absorbing and learning English. Other children learnt new Hmong words which we put into our Hmong class dictionary. At first some children called them Japs, but at the parent teacher meetings we alerted parents and encouraged cultural awareness. It was a bit like what happened with special needs children. One mother commented "Our children aren't going to stare (at people who are different) when they grow up are they!" Parents wanted their children in groups where the Hmong children were and we tried to get Hmong children into all the groups, always trying for a balance.<sup>19</sup>

Helen also commented on racism in the area.

Some older kids stopped a Hmong mother with her baby and said they would set the dog on her if she didn't pay up. There was nothing racist in the school. The school had a block of land that was costing us money to keep the grass down so we asked at a management meeting how parents would feel if it was offered to the Hmong. Everyone agreed, so it was divided into family plots and the Hmong

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

grew produce for Salamanca market. I always got my vegetables given me with a cheery comment “for free, for free”. We charged \$5 per week altogether, approximately 50 cents per family towards water costs. There were mothers with babies on their backs, old and young together. All the children, not just the Hmong children would watch the gardening. The tap became the focal point. The vegetables were washed there and everyone squatted around to watch and learn.

Cultural differences emerged and one was a different perception of time.

The biggest problem was time. The Hmong did not see time as we did and had no idea of punctuality. Before we had the aide, the Hmong would be brought an hour early and picked up two hours late. Mostly it was the grandparents who brought them. Eventually we got the social worker and Chu [Thaow] as interpreter. We drew a clock and put hands on it to show them when they could bring the children. We got special permission to cover me in terms of licencing, to allow a parent to collect up to six children because they would come on behalf of other family and clan members. There were strict regulations about starting kinder but no-one knew the age of their children. I’m saying ‘Too big, too big or too small, too small,’ and the old [Hmong] lady is saying ‘Happy here, happy here.’<sup>20</sup>

A number of adaptations were made to accommodate the Hmong children.

I didn’t see it as a problem when they spoke in Hmong but in other places it could have been seen as one. For our Christmas play at the end of the year we included traditional Hmong ceremonies. There was a move to extract any Christian or religious references from educational programmes but we had the Hmong children dressed in their traditional costumes to celebrate the Hmong New Year as part of the performance. I called it history and that was acceptable. Each ethnic and religious group at the school had their place in the performances. At the beginning I would explain that we were a multicultural school, everyone was taking part in a way that was appropriate to them, and that we respected all cultures equally.<sup>21</sup>

There were many cultural beliefs to be understood by the staff and Helen was very careful to establish what these were, so as not to cause offence. For example, the Hmong children wore strings tied around their wrists and these got dirty and it was tempting to cut them off. These strings are tied around the wrist as good luck omens, carrying the good wishes of the donors. Given at significant

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

times or times of concern or ill health, they represent protection and must not be removed for three days if their power is to remain effective. Helen said,

First I checked what the cultural significance was and of course, we left them alone. All the little girls had their ears pierced with pieces of matchstick stuck in them but they became infected. We bought cream and explained to parents how it would help. When we went on excursions the little girls wore make-up and the boys had a hair-cut. We were linked administratively with Bowen Road Primary School and they had a policy of no make-up and we shared policies. I had to say the kindergarten children must be excepted because the make-up and hair-cuts represent a mark of respect. Bowen Road accepted and we went on excursions wearing rouge and lipstick. Because of the flexible sense of time the Hmong had, we had to take the excursion bus from door to door to collect the Hmong children! Punctuality was a new concept. The bus drivers were marvellous.<sup>22</sup>

Another policy issue was the acceptance of Hmong children from outside the area and this was allowed because they employed Hmong aides. When asked whether there were any negatives in having the Hmong children at the kindergarten, Helen said,

Not for me. There were frustrations at times, challenges that you would never meet anywhere else. I consider myself lucky to have been there at the time when the Hmong were there. I spoke at state and interstate conferences and seminars. We were [designated] a 'Lighthouse Kindergarten', where others could observe our integration programme. We had visitors from overseas: England, Japan, New Zealand. We worked in conjunction with physiotherapists, speech therapists and occupational therapists. They worked in the classroom with the children including Hmong. The many observers went back to their workplaces with a deeper understanding of Hmong culture and ways of integrating the Hmong children and their families into their programmes.

Helen Lemer won the Australian Early Childhood Association Advocacy Award as 'a voice for young children' in 1999. The citation stated, 'She has led to a tangible difference in the lives of young children (Hmong) and has laid the foundations for future change.' Helen commented 'They [the Hmong children] made such a huge impact on education as I know it, and on the whole community.' There was in fact much innovation generated at East Moonah

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Kindergarten and Child-care as a result of changes in policy and programs developed to cater for the Hmong children.

Elizabeth College, a senior secondary college for years 11 and 12, catered for the Hmong who were too old for high school, and some mature age Hmong also attended classes. They were encouraged to take some mainstream classes in addition to English as a Second Language and they were supported in their English as well as in other subjects. There was little interest in university education, as most Hmong felt it was unrealistic, considering their lack of formal education and interrupted schooling. In conversations I had with them, they expressed the feeling they were anxious to find paid employment and enter the work-force, saying that they wished to be free of government assistance as soon as possible. They had a strong work ethic in most cases.

At Technical and Further Education [TAFE] there were Job-Skills programs which aimed to teach employment related skills to Hmong. Courses in horticulture took place at Bridgewater, a northern suburb with a large percentage of government housing, and some of the classes catered for a variety of students, not just the Hmong. The teachers involved commented on the interesting reaction of other students to the Hmong and the developing respect they had for them after initial hesitance. Penny Dyer, the Multicultural Co-ordinator at TAFE at that time, was involved with the Hmong from approximately 1987-1995. She ran a Migrant Youth Program in 1987 and it included Hmong. Like most people she felt she was thrown in at the deep end in terms of understanding the Hmong but her prior teaching experience helped.<sup>23</sup> There was no need for extra funding, as her program was already funded; nevertheless additional funding was provided by the Department of Education and Training. Neither was there any need for policy changes as the Hmong fitted what Penny described as the TAFE profile, i.e. the category of individual for whom the courses were designed. A sewing class was organised with the objective of providing new skills built on the traditional sewing skills of the Hmong. It was a practical course with no written work, and English skills were included so that new, relevant vocabulary could be learned. It took place at night, allowing for the other daytime responsibilities of participants. The

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<sup>23</sup> Penny Dyer, interviewed Hobart, 3 March, 2006.

whole area was given over to the class and a factory in Hobart provided free fabric. Penny remembers, 'I had a sense of achievement that I had been able to organise the courses and able to assist them to learn skills irrespective of cultural background. They were advancing and using technology they aspired to.'<sup>24</sup> There were also courses at Incat, the Tasmanian company that manufactures catamarans, where Hmong men were trained as welders. Nine of them were subsequently employed at the company. Additional courses in horticulture were developed to support the plan for a Hmong co-operative farm. This project is discussed below.

### **Health**

The Health Service, both State and Commonwealth, played an important part in the early settlement of the Hmong. Health was a major issue as the Hmong had spent several years in the refugee camps, where access to medical treatment was not easy. Some had health treatment requirements as part of their acceptance as refugees. There were some who had been treated for tuberculosis in the camps and needed ongoing treatment. Other conditions also required treatment and dental treatment had rarely been available in the refugee camps. Some of the women had given birth not long before their departure for Australia and others gave birth soon after their arrival. For many Hmong women, confinement was their first experience of Western medicine. In the camps they did not go into hospital to give birth and received little ante- or post-natal care, except in emergencies. The maternity staff members at the Royal Hobart Hospital were not familiar with the Hmong attitudes to childbirth and they were anxious to receive cultural awareness training to equip them in assisting the Hmong women. I provided cultural awareness programs and, whilst Hmong women were not keen to present cultural material, they agreed to accompany me and answer questions at the end of the session. It took time for this cultural understanding to filter through the system and misunderstandings occurred, both culturally and in terms of language and communication.<sup>25</sup> Some Hmong women found it threatening to give birth in unfamiliar surroundings and left hospital as soon as possible after having

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> On lack of cultural understanding amongst maternity staff, see R. Julian et al. *Home from Home: Refugees in Tasmania*, Canberra, 1997, p. 105.

their babies. One left it too late to call an ambulance and it is possible that she preferred to give birth at home. In some cases the new mothers went home to several other children, and fathers had to assist in ways which had not been necessary in Laos or in the camps. The community was anxious to maintain traditions and some Hmong wanted to bury the afterbirth as is customary. Initially this presented a problem to hospital staff but eventually the issue was resolved and some families chose to follow their tradition. Others, after having Australian practice explained to them, opted for that. Jackie Witt, a member of the Hobart Baptist Church CRSS group, described how she accompanied a young Hmong woman to ante-natal class because she had inadequate English to understand the trainer, but wanted to do things the Australian way.<sup>26</sup> At this stage there were no interpreters provided at the classes. The Hmong practice is that after death the spirit of the deceased is sung back by the shaman and reunited with the birth spirit which remains where the placenta was buried. When I asked how they could reconcile this ritual with the Australian practice of destroying the placenta, one Hmong woman answered that the birth spirit would remain somewhere above the hospital because the placenta had been cremated there and the death spirit could be reunited with it. She also added that maybe the children would not follow the custom in the future.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst childbirth was the reason for most Hmong hospital admissions, there were a number of adults and children admitted to the Royal Hobart Hospital. The Children's Ward experienced difficulty with identifying parents when several visitors to one child became confusing. There were communication problems and, when more than one person answered to the same name, staff were afraid they might have made a mistake. An interpreter was also necessary to ensure that parents understood routines to follow and return visits for check-ups. When the first Hmong adult was admitted to the hospital, the staff was unaware of the significance of the cotton strings tied around the patient's wrist. As previously noted, this custom is carried out to offer good wishes and protection for special occasions but is especially significant when someone is sick. There was consternation from the Hmong when staff cut off the strings. This, along with

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<sup>26</sup> Jackie Witt, interviewed 4 August 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation with Hmong woman, F1, Hobart, circa 1985.

other cultural concerns, was the reason for hospital staff and administrators, Hmong and others, including AMES teachers, attending a meeting to discuss appropriate protocols which would allow for Hmong cultural preferences. One area of concern to hospital staff was that the Hmong came in extended groups to visit the patients. Another problematic issue discussed was that of the post-mortem. As noted earlier, rumours from America surfaced periodically in the refugee camps, and in the diaspora communities, that in the West doctors removed body parts which were not replaced before burial. The Hmong discussed this with me in English classes. They explained that the idea of interfering with a body after death was not the Hmong way; of particular concern was any investigation involving the brain. At the meeting, doctors gave assurances that, should a post-mortem be necessary, there would be discussion with the family, it would interfere as little as possible and all parts examined would be returned. This did not make it any easier for most Hmong to come to terms with post-mortem examinations, but they have come to accept that Australian law has requirements which must be fulfilled. I am aware of one instance in which a Hmong family gave permission for an autopsy when there was a coronial investigation into the death, but asked that the head not be touched.

Bill Flassman was the Administrator at the Royal Hobart Hospital from 1971 to 1990. He described how the Immigration Department asked the hospital to provide a special service for the Hmong.

They were a needy group and that was recognised by the Hospital Board. We didn't do it for the Vietnamese. They saw Penny McCartney [doctor] at Mt St Canice [migrant hostel] but, because a number of the Hmong had had hepatitis B and C, we were asked by Immigration to ensure they got their shots soon after arrival.<sup>28</sup>

Wendy Witzerman was Assistant Medical Records Supervisor at the time and explained how medical records were raised from lists provided by the Immigration Department.

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<sup>28</sup> Bill Flassman and Wendy Witzerman, joint interview, Hobart, 30 March, 2006.

There were difficulties and confusion, partly because of the similarity in names and pronunciation we didn't understand. We often had to do a bit of a think because they [the names] were the same.<sup>29</sup>

The establishment of a special service for the Hmong came at the same time as a move to become more culturally aware at the hospital. Bill Flassman was involved in those changes.

As a member of a team I sat and worked through a number of difficult situations with Australian workers. We employed many ethnic workers. I was acting as a mediator. There was a general move to try to improve the English of our migrant workers. We had English in the Workplace programs for kitchen and cleaning staff. It went parallel with efforts for the patients' cultures to be understood. They [the Hmong] were prepared to accept change.<sup>30</sup>

Wendy Witzerman was also very aware of the situation.

Yes and with far less knowledge than us. They came in and had their injection and would then go back to their GP. They may have come back to have their baby. If a Hmong woman presented to have a Hepatitis B or C injection, they would be given a basic outpatient record but a pregnant lady would be referred to ante-natal and would get a different record with an M prefix for maternity. These were kept separately from general records.<sup>31</sup>

Bill Flassman added, 'They [the Hmong] brought cultural awareness to the hospital from the Board down. The system established for the Hmong was a once off and not good medicine, but was the best option at the time.'<sup>32</sup> Wendy thought

It was a shame there were no records kept so we could show you what they were like. They are the source of information down the line, familial histories and many other things....Records should have been archived but were shredded, including birth registers.<sup>33</sup>

It would seem that the changes in policy at the hospital, as they catered for the Hmong, and which resulted from greater cultural understanding, came about at a time when there was a general impetus in the hospital to improve understanding

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Meaning that there were better ways medically and administratively to deal with the issue. Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

of both migrant staff and patients, and the presence of the Hmong contributed to this happening.

Another member of the hospital staff who was involved with the Hmong was Judy Street who at the time was Clinical Nurse Consultant (Paediatrics) and worked in the Children's Ward from 1975 until her retirement in 1994. Her first memories of the Hmong were when they were brought for an orientation visit to the hospital and were shown around the Children's Ward.<sup>34</sup> These tours of the hospital were at the request of teachers of English from AMES who attempted to orientate the Hmong and other new arrivals to services available. This idea was an innovation introduced when the first Vietnamese refugees arrived. The liaison person at the hospital was Sister Bridget Hutchison, Assistant Director of Nursing, Emergency Services.

I thought it was a fantastic idea to show them round the hospital. It was such a positive thing. It really hit me at the time that it was good to feel it was a community thing. We got the wards to do their bit. We handed them over to different wards. My biggest problem was trying to speak slowly enough for them to understand. I'm a dreadful one for jargon.<sup>35</sup>

As mentioned, one issue was the number of visitors who came to see the children. Judy Street said,

One child was very sick. It was evening and a staff member sent a number of Hmong visitors away. I suspect the staff member was less than tolerant. Bridget Hutchison got in touch and said "There's been a complaint." Our acute nursing room was very small. Then we had a good meeting with the Hmong leader. He explained that in their culture it was etiquette for everyone to visit and if you did not visit, it was discourteous to the family. We tried to accommodate a larger number of visitors. We came to an agreement with the Hmong that not all the visitors would be there at the same time. We made people [staff] recognise that the visiting was not just that people wanted to visit but there was an issue of cultural courtesy. The Hmong taught staff to be more sensitive. They would bring their own food. Xao [Thaow] would have been there as I don't remember having to get interpreters. They were very grateful.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Judy Street, interviewed Hobart, 7 April, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Bridget Hutchison, interviewed Hobart, 26 July, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Judy Street, interviewed Hobart, 7 April, 2006.

For Bridget Hutchison, the mediation with the Hmong illustrated that her 'life was spent calming troubled waters.' Bridget pointed out that there was training to ensure staff understood the rights of the Hmong. 'We barely met them half way I felt. I look back now and wonder what we could have done better.' Bridget believes that by being there,

The Hmong helped us improve the way the system works. They alerted us and the community responded. Because of my exposure to the Hmong I am aware of the system and know who to ring. You don't just shrug your shoulders and say it's too much. The Hmong paved the way. Tasmania was behind the eight ball on immigration. Because the Hmong came, the hospital began to open up to migrants. The experience with the Hmong has helped us with the African refugees.<sup>37</sup>

The general practice most involved in the health care of the Hmong was that of Drs Wane and Jackett. Dr Jim Wane was doctor to Vue and Chue Thaow and, later, other family members and the wider Hmong community. He remained their doctor until retirement in 1996. His first memory was of asking Xao, Vue Thaow's brother, to assist a Hmong lady in labour at the hospital.

Xao couldn't go into the labour ward because he was a male [unrelated]. The staff said 'We'll call an interpreter', and it was Xao who got called! There were three Neng Yangs in the labour ward at the same time! They all lived in Moonah and had similar addresses.<sup>38</sup>

This supports Wendy Witzerman's point about the difficulty calling up the correct medical records at the hospital. Dr Wane had been the Admissions Officer at the Royal Hobart Hospital before setting up private practice.

I still had a presence there because of various committees and so on. One of the things I had done was to persuade the medical school that all medical students should do compulsory first aid training [with him], so many local doctors knew me and I could jump up and down. I told them that if Xao got held up for half an hour when he was called as an interpreter, he would leave. So he was never held up and neither were the patients.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Bridget Hutchison, interviewed Hobart, 26 July, 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Dr Jim Wane, interviewed Kingston, 6 April, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

There were no cultural issues that Dr Wane was aware of, as Vue and Chue Thaow insulated him from these as interpreters for the Hmong. Vue had medical knowledge as he was studying medical technology. However, there was a service delivery problem as more Hmong arrived. This was as a result of the difficulty in identifying people because of the similarity in names.

‘We also realised preventative measures were not being taken’ noted Dr Wane.

For them in their culture, illness was not due to the things we know it is due to. Illness is out of their control. There was no extra funding for the Hmong until I got the grant [for The General Practice Demonstration Projects Program H’mong Interpreter Project] in 1992. The grant was trying to improve the provision of GP services. It was an application done on the back of an envelope at the last minute when I heard about the grants. I suppose I ‘tear-jerked’ them. It was the first private application awarded in Australia. The Commonwealth was keen to show they could help private practice. It was very political. The idea was to have demonstration practices. The Division of General Practice was trying to improve practice in a particular area. They chose not to offer money across the board but to channel it to specific areas to practices which could demonstrate a need. One issue was breast-feeding problems. The [Hmong] teenage mothers at school couldn’t express milk because they believed spilt breast-milk would cause the baby to die. So the babies were weaned.<sup>40</sup>

This grant represented some innovative thinking in order to improve health service delivery to the Hmong.

Xao Thaow was appointed to Dr Wane and Dr Jacket’s general practice as an interpreter and information officer under the grant.

We needed Xao to push them [the Hmong] into coming [for preventive medicine]. Immunisation was voluntary but Xao would sit outside Ogilvie High School and say ‘You, you and you, vaccinations. Before Xao was employed we had to allow extra time and it was chaos. Previously they would use a five year-old child to interpret. There was total chaos with their records. Xao dealt with the records and sorted it out. Compliance with medication was an issue too. I remember Xao helped a shaman who was diabetic, with his injections. I treated them under Medicare and consultations with interpreters took about five times as long. Even after the grant there was no recognition of the fact that twenty per cent of my

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. This problem still exists. A number of Hmong women said they have had to cease breast-feeding for this reason and because they needed to return to work in order to keep up with mortgage payments.

consultations were not economic because they took so long and there were practice costs. The Hmong needed immunisation for hepatitis but the Commonwealth wouldn't provide it. Kim Boyer [State Health Department] provided the money. It was important that they were immunised as they were handling food and we wanted to protect the children.<sup>41</sup>

Dr Wane also gave talks on preventative medicine, in particular contraception, to groups of Hmong parents. He commented, 'We saw a need and did something about it.'<sup>42</sup> In the case of the hepatitis vaccinations, the State Government stepped in where the Commonwealth Government refused to act, moving outside its normal provisions. It is worth mentioning here that the situation with the Hmong was not well-understood nationally, as initially they mainly settled in Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart, not in other areas, and as already noted, were very different from the previous intake of Asian refugees, the Vietnamese.

### **Employment**

Because of lack of skills appropriate to the local employment market, the Hmong were at a disadvantage. In addition, very few had adequate language skills to match employers' requirements. Nevertheless, a number of people did obtain employment. There were infrastructure positions such as interpreters and bilingual information officers employed by the Immigration Department and the general practice of Drs Wane and Jacket, and the education system had need of teacher aides in schools to assist teachers of Hmong children. There was a similar need in AMES, which also employed Hmong women as child-carers, along with Benjafield Child-Care centre. Two Hmong men were employed as gardeners, one at Government House and the other with the Clarence Council on Hobart's eastern shore. Another man worked for a local vegetable market. Some men obtained employment at a chicken processing factory and others worked as welders at Incat Catamarans. As mentioned, training courses there were offered under the Commonwealth Jobskills program and prepared them as aluminium welders, as well as offering literacy and language training. A number of the course

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

participants were eventually employed at the factory but demand was dependent on fluctuating markets. Others worked in light industry but again were subject to loss of work when markets fluctuated. Despite these employment opportunities, many of the older Hmong remained unemployed and found their situation very difficult. With a poor school retention rate for younger Hmong, many of them were also looking for unskilled jobs. This lack of employment clearly fuelled the later exodus to Queensland, but as will be seen, Queensland did not solve unemployment for older Hmong.

### **Social Security**

Although most Hmong were anxious to work, their skills were not always recognised by potential employers, and so they were clients of the Social Security Department while they looked for employment. They also received child endowment money and were the responsibility of the ethnic liaison officer at the time, Maria Vialle. Eventually a number of departments had ethnic liaison officers to whom migrants could go for sympathetic treatment, but the Social Security Department was the first to have a designated officer.

I became involved because of the department's policy of equal access. I kept saying at work, "They can't understand you so how can they get equal access if you don't use interpreters?" Mark Hay was the Benefits Officer at the time and he was exceptionally open to issues. I instigated training for the staff. Cultural awareness was such an important issue but not understood in terms of language and benefits. Vue said to me "Why are all the officials we deal with, women?", so I always started interviews with "Does it offend you to be interviewed by a woman?". Vue gave me a lot of help. It was Vue who explained a lot of cultural things; the stitching they did and the meanings; family, which in their culture could be a neighbour. I always had a very open mind.<sup>43</sup>

Maria organised staff training to try to improve cultural awareness at the Department of Social Security.

I got Steve Biddulph [author and trainer] to do some training for people involved with migrants. He used games to make us aware and encouraged us to make appropriate games too. He said shared language with another culture is not enough. You must understand the culture.

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<sup>43</sup> Maria Vialle, interviewed Kingston, 10 April, 2006.

Another person was Steven Pinkus, a clinical psychologist at Clare House [a centre for psychological support for teenagers]. He's Jewish so the idea of cultural differences is very important to him. I got you [Margaret Eldridge] to do training with the counter staff. Your participation in the Steve Bidulph workshop made me think you would be a good person to be involved.<sup>44</sup>

The issue of funding was of concern in many departments as can be seen from comments made by others, but in the case of the Department of Social Security, there was extra funding available. This was used to advantage. Maria added,

I wasn't aware that many of the Hmong were illiterate until I started helping them fill out forms. There were difficulties with dates of birth. They didn't know them. There were racist remarks from some staff members who resented help for migrants.<sup>45</sup>

However, the department hierarchy was at the forefront of change to ensure access and equity and at a conference in Canberra it was made clear that it was imperative to employ an appropriate interpreter and not use family members or friends.<sup>46</sup> This was an issue for other organisations at the time. For example, some doctors were unwilling to use interpreters, as Dr Wane pointed out. Marie Dungey, Principal Education Officer of ESL, also referred to the fact that that she insisted on interpreters being hired and properly paid. Maria explained,

There were conceptual difficulties for the Hmong and inappropriate use of interpreters. Bi-lingual officers were more useful to deliver information than Social Security officers who couldn't be sure if what they were saying was being accurately translated.<sup>47</sup>

At the time, the official NAATI [National Accreditation Authority of Translators and Interpreters] interpreters had to have completed a certain level of education and, of the Hmong, only Vue Thaow had achieved the required level. This meant that some Hmong, who were capable of basic interpreting, did not qualify for NAATI accreditation. One way around this was to create a new level of interpreter called a community interpreter which did not require the same educational levels which NAATI insisted on. An innovative course was designed

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

and undertaken at AMES, which trained eight Hmong as community interpreters. The three-pronged approach of the course included English language up-grading, knowledge of the community and interpreter training. This had the potential to ease the lack of interpreters but, although all the participants were deemed able to fulfil the role of community interpreter, none was ever employed. No explanation for this was ever forthcoming, which was a great disappointment to the participants and to the teachers.

There was also an important shift in policy that reduced the time spent on searching for work until English levels were higher. Maria Vialle recalled, 'Special Benefit payments came in when I was there [Department of Social Security]. The Hmong could get them if they were attending English classes. They were exempt from looking for work while doing an English course'.<sup>48</sup> Maria explained that a senior staff member in Canberra was an Indian migrant who had arrived in Australia with good English skills and

appreciated that policies needed to be adapted and softened for people with minimal English. He had arguments with my Tasmanian supervisor and their clash made things very difficult. There was an enormous amount of resistance to refugees in the department. It was really difficult to make some staff realise that it didn't matter how many times you repeated or shouted something, if people didn't understand the concept, they didn't understand. I pushed for more information in other languages and also for information on-line but it didn't happen in my time. It was my way to go to their homes to make it less threatening for them, but I knew it wasn't the Asian way to launch straight into business. You had to accept a cup of tea first. I went to policy level to achieve changes. They [Hmong] had to have medical stuff done as soon as possible as some of them were not fit for work.

Maria's way of working speeded up the process and people moved on to benefits more quickly. She added

I had a good response up the line. I had good support but I was stubborn and argumentative. I saw myself as someone with a mission... The Hmong were instrumental in nudging understanding in the department. They pushed the notion that equal access means nothing unless you have communication.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

The Immigration Department employed bilingual information officers to serve the Hmong. When a teacher perceived difficulties the Hmong were having in understanding the Telephone Interpreter Service and the problems with obtaining interpreters, she devised a booklet to assist. It relied on pictorial instructions. Motivation for this came when a Hmong told the teacher concerned that when he rang for an interpreter, the person turned on the radio and went away (the 'Please hold' function). The Immigration Department had the booklet professionally designed as a pamphlet, which was printed nationally in English and Hmong, with illustrations for those who did not read either language.

### **Voluntary Groups**

In addition to the government departments involved in assisting the Hmong there were voluntary groups. One of these was an outreach program of the Churches of Christ called Friends of All Nations. It provided a social setting for migrants and an opportunity to meet local residents. The older Hmong fitted into this pre-existing group and met other migrants. The co-ordinator, Bev Holland, was very aware of the needs of everyone in the group and assisted settlement in a variety of ways. She organised for church land at Howrah, on Hobart's eastern shore, to be available for the Hmong to grow vegetables. She found work for some people and provided warm clothes. She networked widely in order to assist and also pastored the small number of Hmong Christians.

The other Community Refugee Settlement Scheme groups which supported the Hmong CRSS group, were at the 'coal face' of settlement. They dealt with many day-to-day issues, some of which have already been mentioned. It was the first time they had been involved with settlement of a group where many people did not speak any English and where a number were preliterate. The philosophy of the groups was explained by Jackie Witt. 'We offered unconditional support. It was non-patronising with no strings attached.'<sup>50</sup> Her group gave financial support in a variety of forms including paying for a trailer to assist the Hmong in moving house. Instead of the usual on-arrival meal prepared for a newly arrived refugee family, they offered a sack of rice. They also hosted a performance of the play

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<sup>50</sup> Jackie Witt, interviewed Hobart, 7 August, 2007.

‘Highest Mountain, Fastest River’ as part of Australia’s annual Refugee Week, and the craft exhibition and sale which accompanied it.

The earlier comments of Maria Vialle and others indicate how integral was the input of Vue Thaow and his family to the experiences Tasmanians had of Hmong settlement. In all the cases to this point, Vue, and often his brother and wife, were there to advise and support the locals. It is not only an indication of the enormous responsibility they took for the settlement of their people, but shows that support came from the Hmong themselves, especially after the community became more established. It is important to place on record the dedicated assistance of Vue and Chu Thaow, and other family members, that they offered to all newly arriving Hmong as well as those who were earlier arrivals. Vue was recognised as the leader of the Hmong in Hobart, as he had sponsored many of the earlier families and established the chain migration which subsequently took place. Having received secondary and tertiary education in Laos and studied in Tasmania, he was the best educated of the Hmong and had been in Tasmania longer than any others. He had the best mastery of English and the greatest experience of the Australian ‘system’, acquired initially as Vue explained, ‘from Mrs Halpern, the social worker at the Immigration Department [who] helped me to understand the Australian system, but she left Tasmania and went to Melbourne where she died’.<sup>51</sup>

In Laos, Vue would not have been a leader because he was too young and the clan system required each clan to have its own leaders and elders.<sup>52</sup> Adapting to the situation in Hobart, the Hmong realised that Vue should be leader for all the clans, because of his local understanding and experience. He soon learned that he needed to be politically active to gain support for his people and to assist him to bring more Hmong to Tasmania. He ‘trod the corridors of power’ in his efforts to assist his people and was recognised as a leader, not only among his own community but amongst migrants in general, serving on the committee of the Tasmanian Ethnic Communities Council. As the community grew, Vue and Chu acted as interpreters for their people and as advisors in a multitude of situations. They were called on by the Hmong, and by locals as well, when their assistance

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<sup>51</sup> Vue Thaow, interviewed Hobart, 21 April, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> Hmong man M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

was required to deal with issues involving the Hmong. A number of those locals interviewed for this study commented on how helpful Vue and Chue had been in assisting with settlement and cultural issues.

Vue was in contact with other longer-established Hmong on the mainland and with them set up the Hmong Australia Association (HAA) to look after the Hmong who came as refugees. There was support from Hmong on the mainland for the Hobart community when they did not have elders and shaman to perform appropriate rituals. Mainland Hmong came to Hobart for funerals for example. Meetings of HAA took place regularly and the community could raise issues of concern and obtain advice. Vue Thaow said, 'We had a meeting almost every weekend to work out what we could do to make the Hmong viable in Tasmania...we talked a lot about all sorts of things like education and employment'.<sup>53</sup> The meetings were usually held at Vue and Chue's home and on one occasion the police, responding to a tip-off, raided the home when a meeting was taking place, as neighbours thought drug deals were being negotiated.

Vue also set up Divis, a housing co-operative for the Hmong in Hobart. Each family contributed \$100 dollars a month into the fund which was used to purchase properties to let to Hmong families. This enabled them to establish themselves first as tenants and later as owners. Some families withdrew later on and, when the Hmong left Tasmania, the properties were sold and the funds shared amongst the shareholders. In addition to the support offered by Vue and Chue, Vue's brother Xao Thaow, their son Chanh Peng and daughter Phahat, served the community in the same way. Some of the other young men demonstrated leadership and accepted responsibility for helping those who were in need of assistance.

From the recollections of people who were involved in assisting the Hmong in the difficult task of settlement, in a vastly different culture from the one that was familiar to them, it can be seen that there was evident concern for their welfare and innovative support offered. In each case the person interviewed described the changes that were made to accommodate the newly settling Hmong community. In some cases the adjustments required changes in policy and

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<sup>53</sup> 'Stateline Tasmania', Transcript, ABC TV, 5 September, 2003.

improved understanding of a pre-literate society. Comments from some of those involved in the settlement of the Hmong show that they responded to obvious needs, and did not wait to obtain official permission where they deemed changes were necessary. They sought that, and funding later, if they could.

It is clear that AMES attempted to be flexible to enable the Hmong to attend classes. The Child Migrant system and individual schools such as East Moonah Kindergarten, went ahead with changes that were perceived to be necessary to serve the Hmong, and retrospectively obtained official permission for the changes they had already made. The hospital combined greater understanding of migrant employees with attempts to understand the Hmong and cultural aspects of their health beliefs and needs. The Social Security Department modified their approach to ensure the Hmong obtained equal access and equity and were served with respect.

In most cases it was the determination of individuals which changed attitudes and provision in both government and voluntary organisations. The interviews indicate that people working with the Hmong went to great lengths to develop appropriate procedures to assist them. In some cases they acted first and justified their actions later. Most of the people involved went to considerable trouble and personal effort to ensure the Hmong were well-catered for. In some cases they challenged others and worked outside the normal procedures until the processes could be modified. For each of the people interviewed it must be remembered that there were others who were not interviewed and other efforts that are not on record. Although it took time for the receiving society to understand the Hmong, and it may be that assistance was not always ideal or even appropriate initially, it would seem that for whatever reasons the Hmong left Tasmania, it was not that they had not received support from government departments, voluntary groups and other instrumentalities. The comments of individual Hmong back up this assumption: 'I miss the closeness of Hobart.'<sup>54</sup> 'I like my English lessons in Hobart. I go shopping by myself but not here.'<sup>55</sup> 'We socialised through sport and I still talk to my Tasmanian schoolmates on the

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<sup>54</sup> Hmong woman, F3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>55</sup> Hmong woman, F4, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

phone. I played for the school.’<sup>56</sup> ‘We were consulted by Glenorchy City Council about the development of Benjafield Park as a multicultural park.’<sup>57</sup> It seems then, that there was no lack of support for the Hmong from government agencies or the voluntary sector, which might explain their later move away from Tasmania.

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<sup>56</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### Community Interaction

This chapter investigates the level of interaction between the Hmong and the local Tasmanian community to see whether a lack of connection between Hmong and local Tasmanians could have motivated the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong. Julian writes that she observed a lack of interaction between the Hmong and the Tasmanian host community.<sup>1</sup> This can be substantiated in that some Hmong have expressed the idea that their culture and traditions do not sit well with Australian society.<sup>2</sup> Some try to prevent their young people from taking on any non-Hmong practices or different lifestyles to which they may be exposed. For this reason there are Hmong who keep themselves to themselves. However, young Hmong make their own decisions in many cases and mix as they wish. In Brisbane, one father bemoaned the fact that he had no control over his children and if they wanted to stay out all night with their friends, they did so.<sup>3</sup> Downman supports Julian's position that the Hmong do not interact with the general population.<sup>4</sup> He cites instances of racism from neighbours of the Hmong and their comments are reminiscent of those of midwifery staff recorded by Julian in Hobart, when the Hmong population was larger than it is now.<sup>5</sup> However racism does not necessarily indicate a lack of interaction. It is, in fact, a form of interaction, albeit an unpleasant one for the recipients. Downman writes, 'In essence, they [the Hmong] entered a cultural vacuum in which almost every aspect of their cultural heritage was incompatible and irrelevant to the Australian

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<sup>1</sup> R. Julian et al., *Home from Home, Refugees in Tasmania*, Canberra, 1997, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> Several informants referred to the fact that they could not carry out their rituals in their own homes but needed to find somewhere away from other Australians, so that they would not offend them.

<sup>3</sup> Hmong man, M8, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> S. Downman, 'Inter-ethnic conflict and the Hmong in Australia and Thailand', unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 2004, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup> Julian et al., *Home from Home*, p. 105.

way of life.’<sup>6</sup> Whilst this comment may reflect the difficulties experienced by many Hmong, this chapter will show that there are many in the Australian community who are interested in the Hmong and their culture and there are Hmong who are on good terms with their neighbours, workmates and others. The Hmong, perhaps even more than some other migrants, have had to make enormous adjustments to life in Australia, where so many things, which are taken for granted by Australians, presented new challenges for the Hmong on arrival and subsequently. They have, according to some commentators, moved from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century in the space of a seventy-two hour flight.<sup>7</sup> There are numerous arguments to counter this opinion but it is not necessary to enter into that discussion here. I found there were many references to ‘my friend’ when I interviewed the former Hobart Hmong for this thesis, and no lack of examples of them mixing with Tasmanians and, subsequently, Queenslanders.

Kuah Pearce argues ‘the extent to which the communal self interacts with the host environment is very much dependent on personality and perceived needs’.<sup>8</sup>

Mignot comments that in ‘all the destination countries the degree of integration [of Indo-Chinese refugees] with the native populations remains low’.<sup>9</sup> Whilst generalisations are unwise, it is fair to describe some of the Hmong as shy, whether it be personality or embarrassment about command of English. This shyness has been demonstrated in a number of situations such as the slowness with which the Hmong initially accessed stalls at Salamanca Market. It could also be argued that interaction and friendships out of their own community are the product of time for most migrants and refugees, with or without English language. The Hmong are not alone in being accused of not integrating. The Australian

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<sup>6</sup> Downman, ‘Inter-ethnic conflict and the Hmong’, p 157.

<sup>7</sup> Downman, ‘Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong’, p.157.

<sup>8</sup> K. Kuah-Pearce, ‘Locating the self in the Chinese diaspora: introductory remarks’, *Asian Studies Review*, 30, 3, 2006, p. 231.

<sup>9</sup> M. Mignot, ‘Refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam’, 1975-1993, in R. Cohen, ed. *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 456.

Federal Government announced in October 2007 that it would take no more refugees from Africa until at least July 2008, because the Sudanese have not 'integrated'.<sup>10</sup> This same government espoused a policy of multiculturalism, which encourages migrants and indigenous people to maintain their cultural heritage. Maintenance of cultural practices and interacting with the host society are not mutually exclusive of course, but it could be argued that the issue needs to be carefully examined at a person-to-person level before making any judgements. In a recent conversation with an Australian who had been working in France for a year, she commented that it was very difficult to interact with the French as they did not share the same language, did not seem interested in getting to know foreigners and it was easier to have contact with English people now living in France. If this was the case for Australians in France, the difficulties for the Hmong of interacting with Australians were even more formidable. The issue of trust is pertinent here. In the camps the Hmong had been victims of violence and persecution, not to mention their horrific experiences at the hands of others prior to their escape from Laos. Some of those given the task of supervising them in the camps, such as Thai police, had breached their duty of care and, for their own safety, the Hmong had to learn who could be trusted.<sup>11</sup> This lack of trust was evident, for example, in the reaction of some Hmong towards police. They were initially very afraid of the police in Hobart, until teachers invited a policeman into the classroom to talk with them. This was followed up with a familiarisation visit to police headquarters.

In the early days of the Hobart Hmong community it was difficult for the Hmong to make friends as they did not understand Australian society and many had minimal English. It was a time of adjustment, observation and attempts to understand what was going on around them. There were enormous adaptations to make in order to deal with settlement issues, thus limiting the possibility of meaningful interaction. Some of the men found it particularly difficult. One

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<sup>10</sup> B. Packham and P. Jean, 'African refugees shut out', *Hobart Mercury*, 3 October, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

informant said, 'At the beginning some of the older men were so unhappy they nearly hanged themselves. They were homesick and country sick.'<sup>12</sup> Despite this, the women in particular managed to communicate with minimal English and took many opportunities for social interaction, such as attending The Friends of All Nations sessions at the Churches of Christ and functions at the Migrant Resource Centre. They initiated friendly actions which required little speech. For example, bags of vegetables were left on doorsteps of the people who lent land for the Hmong to grow vegetables, and gifts of embroidery were made to teachers and sponsors, with these overtures only requiring a smile.

When we consider the idea of interaction in relation to the Hmong, it is also important to look at the willingness of the host community to play their part. It is not sufficient for locals to say 'They don't speak English'. They need to recognise themselves as part of the equation. There was a need for others to attempt to communicate using simple English with no slang or idiom and some Tasmanians accomplished this. Sign language and gesture assisted, and with goodwill, it was not seen as being patronising. Irene Matthews in discussing the difficulties the Hmong had with English commented, 'It is because they were communicating in an alien language, and social context directs communication, but non-verbal or social cues provide few clues and remain uncomprehended.'<sup>13</sup> The success of the Hmong in selling their vegetables to a faithful clientele at Salamanca Market is testament to the willingness, on both sides, to overcome what for the Hmong was an alien language, the lack of social cues and other clues and try to communicate and interact. With these hurdles, the fact that the Hmong interacted at all is to their credit. The market gave the Hmong an opportunity to meet each other and to increase their contact with locals. The women in particular developed their communication skills and practised English. Some of the men had jobs elsewhere but, for most of the women, Salamanca Market was their main opportunity to interact with others in the local community.

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<sup>12</sup> Hmong man, M16, interviewed Innisfail, 24 August, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Irene Matthews, interviewed Hobart, 6 April, 2006.

One of the Hmong worked at a fruit and vegetable market in Hobart, which sold some Hmong produce. There, he good-heartedly accepted a modification of his name in typical 'Aussie' style and mixed easily with customers and staff alike. In addition to Salamanca Market, Hmong had stalls at the Sunday market at Kingston, the Margate Train market, Huonville market, all south of Hobart, the Glenorchy market, at a northern suburb and one family even travelled to Launceston, to sell vegetables at the Inveresk market over 200 kilometres from Hobart. The children attended the markets with their parents and, while the younger ones played near the Hmong stalls, older children had tasks to fulfil, including serving customers. Parents often deferred to children who were more confident with English. One of the Hobart Hmong in Brisbane commented on how close the community was in Hobart, both physically and as a community. Salamanca was a focal point for them she said. The Hmong in Brisbane are not growing vegetables commercially and, although there are occasional opportunities for them to get together, there is no focus like Salamanca Market. 'I really miss Hobart and the closeness we had but not the cold weather!'<sup>14</sup>

Examples of interaction began with the first Hmong to arrive in Tasmania, Vue Thaow who, as has been mentioned, was a Colombo Plan student. As the only Hmong in a group of Lao students he could not use the Hmong language and spoke Lao with the other students. At the senior secondary college he improved his English and mixed with Australian students. When the communists took over Laos, Lao students in Australia who were sympathetic to the new regime attempted to re-educate the other Lao students. They tried to influence them as to how they should behave now that Laos was a socialist republic. Along with other students who did not appreciate the indoctrination, Vue brought up the issue with the then Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, who not only said that no-one need attend re-education sessions, but also offered permanent residence to any Indo-

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<sup>14</sup> Hmong woman, F3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005. When asked if the weather had been a factor in moving from Hobart she said it had not been a consideration but it would be hard to return to cold weather after living in the heat of Brisbane.

Chinese students who did not wish to return to their country.<sup>15</sup> This suggests to me that it was presumed that Indo-Chinese students would integrate into Australian society.

When it became possible for Vue Thaow's wife Chue, and their two children to leave Thailand, where they had gone for safety, and come to Tasmania, it was Vue's school-friends and teachers who raised the fares. The involvement of his school community indicates a concern and interest in Vue at a personal level. Vue Thaow has been very much part of the Tasmanian community and has aligned himself with politicians and other people of influence, including the then director of the regional Immigration Department, Elaine Maloney, in order to promote the welfare of his people, which he and his wife have done with passion and dedication. When their son died in 2006, a group of Tasmanian friends who had been involved with Vue and Chue over the years, organised a gathering to share the family's sadness. It was clear from the sentiments expressed that those present regarded the family highly and there was a bond between them all. It suggests that the Hmong leader and his family have interacted with the local community and this can also be supported by the number of items in the local daily newspaper, which has interviewed Vue Thaow on many occasions over the years when seeking information about his community.<sup>16</sup> This willingness to interact presented the rest of the Hmong with an example to emulate.

When the already resident Hmong were unable to handle the numbers of newly arriving Hmong coming from the refugee camps, Vue Thaow requested the involvement of Community Refugee Settlement Scheme groups, such as the one to which I belong. These groups of local residents are sometimes associated with a church or club and are the human face of refugee settlement. They were in constant contact with the Hmong immediately post-arrival. As well as the hands-on business of settlement, they also drew the attention of the bureaucracy to issues

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<sup>15</sup> Hmong man, M1, interviewed Hobart, 21 April, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> E. Reeves, 'A labour of love', *Hobart Mercury*, 31 October, 2000 and E. Whinnett, 'Hmong pulling up roots', *Hobart Mercury*, 29 November, 2002.

which needed resolving, along with keeping close to Hmong families and their relatives to ensure that the process of settlement ran as smoothly as possible. The Hmong appreciated this and many have remained in contact with their support groups ever since. The Hobart Baptist Church Community Settlement of Refugees (CSR, formerly CRSS) group which I established in 1981, and of which I am still a member, is one such group which supported five Hmong families at different times. For several years after their arrival, in emergencies, the Hmong called them for help and they still keep in touch informally. None of those families remains in Tasmania now but CSR members have visited them in their new homes in Brisbane and Cairns. When they left Tasmania some of the families returned furniture they had been given by their support group, so that it could be given to other refugees, indicating an understanding of the refugee situation experienced by those other than the Hmong. The Baptist church had provided funds for the Hmong community to purchase a trailer for moving furniture, a practical demonstration of their involvement with the Hmong. When one family lost their home in a fire in Queensland after relocating, the group sent a donation to help with refurnishing. When babies arrive the group sends gifts and, when relatives joined the family from Wat Tham Krabok in 2005, the group sent a substantial donation towards settlement costs. These gestures indicate that there was a level of friendship between the Hmong families and their support group. Had there not been interaction when they were in Hobart it seems unlikely that these gestures would have been made. Whilst the Hmong families are very busy with their new lives, they happily welcome members of their former support group. I received considerable assistance and a very warm welcome in Queensland, including accommodation, when researching the former Hobart Hmong in 2005.

This on-going interaction exposed the CRSS groups to a very different culture and aided in cultural understanding on both sides. Whilst initially the relationship was one where the Hmong were dependant on their support group, that changed with time, as the Hmong became empowered and it is now fair to describe the relationship as friendship in many cases. The refugee settlement

groups work on a model of interaction and not a deficit model where the refugee is seen as being a problem. The contribution of the refugees to the groups and Tasmanian society is emphasised, and paternalistic attitudes are discouraged. Former refugees assist groups with newer families as they arrive. Comments from Hmong informants in Queensland suggested that they still had links with Tasmanian friends in Hobart and Melbourne including members of the settlement groups.<sup>17</sup>

Jackie Witt, a member of the Hobart Baptist Church CRSS group, who was closely involved with the Hmong families which the group assisted, commented,

I thought I would be sharing my skills but it was the other way around. It was very humbling. It wasn't just me, it was all my family. They looked after my baby son and I can't think of a more mutual thing than sharing the children. It was so good for my boys, growing up understanding these other people; a very rich experience.<sup>18</sup>

Jackie went to ante-natal classes with one Hmong girl whom she had been tutoring.

She was really struggling but made a big effort to be part of the host community. She was so generous despite living in poverty. She was willing to approach childbirth in the Western way. She asked advice on naming her baby too. When I had my own baby they gave me a Hmong embroidered baby sling.

Asked about how she felt the Hmong interacted with the local community, Jackie replied, 'Relationships developed conversation by conversation', and she listed a number of situations in which the Hmong had to negotiate their way through the host society. Jackie and her husband employed a young Hmong man in their company, Witt Design, and asked why he drove his car to work when he lived within walking distance. He told them it was to protect himself from locals who jeered at him as he walked to work. She continued,

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<sup>17</sup> Hmong man M3, Hmong women, F6 and F10, interviewed Queensland, August, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Jackie Witt, Hobart Baptist Church CRSS group, interviewed 4 August, 2007.

Our other workers learned from him and supported him. We enjoyed the family's company at staff get-togethers and their little boy brought great pleasure... I remember when 'Grandfather C' died, his son rang me to tell me he had not survived the [heart] operation and it was important to the family that we were part of their mourning and attended the funeral.

The organisation of a funeral required this Hmong family to negotiate with funeral company employees and council authorities. A conversation with a funeral company employee confirmed this, and he described how he had driven some of the Hmong elders around southern Tasmania to find a cemetery which offered the features of terrain which were necessary to satisfy the Hmong requirements for burial.<sup>19</sup>

Jackie also commented on the racist difficulties the Hmong experienced which she felt must have affected how willing they were to trust strangers and mix, and noted that it had been difficult to find accommodation for the large Hmong families as landlords rebuffed them and one estate agent described them as 'filth'. Whilst this could be seen to support Julian's statements about the Hmong not interacting with locals, it is more a reflection on the host society. In contrast, the Minister of the Hobart Baptist Church, where one Hmong family worshipped and where some of the congregation interacted regularly with the Hmong, said that the Hmong were the most wonderful example of a gracious people.<sup>20</sup> Jackie felt that the father of the family worshipping at the church, really tried to reach out to the congregation. He remained behind after services, developing friendships over a cup of tea or coffee and his three little girls stayed overnight with a church family on more than one occasion. Jackie said she felt the wonderful leadership of Vue and Chue Thaow was very important in encouraging community interaction throughout.<sup>21</sup>

Whilst the involvement of the CSSR groups could be seen as a narrow form of interaction, there were other groups and individuals who were drawn in

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<sup>19</sup> Telephone conversation with a funeral company employee, 18 June, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Jackie Witt, Hobart Baptist Church CRSS group, interviewed 4 August, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

to supporting the Hmong, either through the groups or independently of them. The local ABC radio station interviewed me in or about July, 1995. I was subsequently approached by interested people to see if there was any way they could assist the Hmong community. A magazine article had produced the same sort of response earlier that year.<sup>22</sup> In 1991 the Salamanca Theatre Company performed a play about the Hmong: *Highest Mountain, Fastest River*. Written by Donna Abela, playwright in residence, it was directed by Annette Downs. When it was at the planning stage, the company approached the Adult Migrant English Service to see if they could talk to the Hmong and find people who would be prepared to take part. I facilitated the meeting because I believed it would be a good opportunity for interaction with a different group of people and would give the Hmong increased self-esteem. The Hmong were very happy to talk with the company but not willing to take part in the play. They excused themselves by saying they were too shy. With persuasion they agreed to advise the company as the play moved into rehearsals. This interaction was organised as part of the English language program under the heading of IMPACT (Independent Migrant Program of Active Community Tasks), where language students went out into the community to practise English in authentic ways. The Hmong had guided worksheets which related to the activity and they went to the theatre company studio in the Salamanca Arts Centre. They gave advice about costume, language, events and singing. The theatre company found it of great assistance and felt it enhanced the production. In the programme notes their director wrote,

This production could not have been possible without the Hmong community of Hobart. We wish to thank them all for their enormous generosity in sharing their stories, inviting us into their homes and devoting many hours to production in the rehearsal room.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> M. Eldridge and J. Sharman, 'A Home at Last?', *Leatherwood*, 15, 1995, pp. 17-21.

<sup>23</sup> A. Downes, programme notes, 'Highest Mountain, Fastest River', written by Donna Abela and performed by the Salamanca Theatre Company, 1991.

At the first performance of the play, the Hmong along with their multi-ethnic English class, were invited not only as audience but as a resource for interaction with other audience members afterwards, when they answered questions. It was a very cathartic experience for some of the Hmong who said, 'At last our story is being told so Australians will know who we are and why we are refugees'.<sup>24</sup> The Hmong were happy with the way in which their story was told and in particular commented on the actor who sang in Hmong after they trained her. After the performance they said that she sounded just like a Hmong person.<sup>25</sup> All were deeply moved and, in some cases, quite distressed by the graphic portrayal of the Secret War and the horrors experienced by many Hmong.<sup>26</sup> The play went on tour to schools, including those in isolated areas, was presented to 2,500 children and their teachers, was reworked in 1993 and toured the mainland in 1994. *Highest Mountain, Fastest River* received the Australian Human Rights Award for Drama in 1992. A gathering to celebrate the award was held on the Northside ferry at the docks in Hobart and the Hmong were invited. They enjoyed a tour of the vessel and interacted with other guests.

In 2000 the play was reworked, again in Hobart, with Richard Bladel as producer, and he was able to include two young Hmong men in his production. They were younger than the group of men involved in the first productions and took the role of story tellers, and despite their lack of previous dramatic experience, they performed movingly. Five years later one of them said how nervous he had been but how exciting it was to be part of the production.<sup>27</sup> It is a very important memory for him. The other performers were not Hmong and appreciated the interaction with the Hmong actors, neither of whom has continued with acting. Judging from audience reaction at the time, this play had a

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<sup>24</sup> M. Eldridge, Australian Human Rights Award nomination document for 'Highest Mountain, Fastest River', 12 August, 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Personal conversation with Hmong man, Brisbane, August 2005.

tangible effect in helping Tasmanian audiences understand the situation of the Hmong.

Reference was made earlier to an exhibition of Hmong craft at the Moonah branch of the Migrant Resource Centre. The Hmong acted as attendants for this and answered question from patrons. Another exhibition entitled 'Witnesses' at the Chameleon Art Gallery in Hobart included a forum where Hmong could tell their stories and demonstrate aspects of their culture. I argue that a community not willing to interact would not have agreed to participate in such gatherings which were previously completely outside their experience. There were other exhibitions including one at the Adult Migrant English Centre and another at a Refugee Week performance of *Highest Mountain, Fastest River*. One Hmong woman represented Hmong women at a gathering to celebrate International Women's Day and took her role very seriously, interacting despite limited English. Whilst not all the Hmong were able to interact with people because of their lack of English and Tasmanians' lack of Hmong, and because of a natural reticence, many did. There were a number of celebrations and cultural festivals where the Hmong wore their national costumes and performed dances. The dances were not traditional Hmong dances, as Hmong women traditionally do not dance. Phahat Thaow, Vue and Chue's daughter, went to Melbourne to learn Lao dances, which she later taught to the Hmong young people, so that they would have something to share when they invited local people to their celebrations or when they were invited to participate in local multi-cultural festivals, which they frequently did. Such efforts represent a determination among some Hmong to participate and interact. In an article, on the Hmong in Hobart, Elizabeth Dean commented, 'The community interest generated by this small group of people owes a lot to their willingness to share their culture and their stories with us'.<sup>28</sup>

The Hmong New Year was celebrated annually at Benjafield Park in Moonah, a suburb where many Hmong lived and teachers, friends and

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<sup>28</sup> E. Dean, 'The Hmong in Hobart', *Post Migration*, April 1993, p.19.

neighbours were invited. The young people played the New Year ball games that traditionally offer an opportunity for young people to meet their peers and choose a marriage partner. One of these young people recalled, many years later in Cairns, how much she had enjoyed going camping on the east coast with Tasmanian friends.<sup>29</sup> However it should be added that some Hmong parents would not let their daughters attend Bonza, the youth club for migrant young people, although their sons were allowed to participate. The club encouraged interaction between different ethnic groups of young people and local people who were leaders. Some Hmong girls attending Ogilvie High School were not allowed to join in after-school activities, but it needs to be born in mind that some of these girls had considerable responsibility for several younger brothers and sisters at home, while the parents were working at their farms.<sup>30</sup> The girls were allowed to take Friday off to assist their parents in preparing vegetables for market the next day, and assisted also at the market. (This is reminiscent of the children of Tasmanian hop-growers, who, in the past, had to assist with hop-farming and missed school as a result). Whilst this apparent unwillingness to allow interaction has a cultural basis, it also reflects the practical responsibilities which stood in the way of the girls' greater interaction with schoolmates and others.

Tasmanians were invited to attend a very large New Year celebration which was held at the Citygate Baptist Church. A number of distinguished guests, including politicians, attended. It was at this gathering that the Hmong first displayed the Chinese Hmong costumes they had obtained, after some of them had been to China to search for their roots.<sup>31</sup> Festivals like this also indicate a willingness to become involved with the local community. At Bowen Road Primary School, the Parents and Friends Association produced a recipe book which contains some Hmong recipes and indicates that the contributors were

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<sup>29</sup> Hmong woman, F13, interviewed Cairns, 20 September, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Marie Dungey, interviewed Margate, 29 March, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Wronska-Friend writes of this globalisation of Hmong costumes in Tapp and Lee, *The Hmong of Australia*, pp. 97-122.

interacting with other parents. Some Hmong were also on the school's Parents and Friends Committee.<sup>32</sup>

Whilst most interaction was in a group situation, as it would have been in Laos, as noted earlier one Hmong lady, Lou Xiong, was invited to exhibit her needlework, along with two other embroideries by unknown Hmong, in an exhibition called 'Tradition, Cloth, Meaning-Contemporary Textiles', curated by Sarah Lindsay.<sup>33</sup> Lou attended the opening with her teacher because she was nervous about going alone. She answered questions from guests and was very happy when she discovered that the exhibition would tour country towns on the mainland of Australia and be seen by people who did not know the Hmong. The article, 'A home at last?', mentioned previously, accompanied the exhibition to introduce the Hmong community to viewers of the display who were unfamiliar with their culture. As already noted, Lou Xiong also taught sewing to a class of schoolchildren at Springfield Primary School and related to them very well.

A small group of the Hobart Hmong were Christian, having converted in the refugee camps. When in Hobart they mostly attended the Churches of Christ, where Bev Holland supported them, and eventually they were joined by a Hmong Christian pastor from Thailand. There were Hmong bible studies and at one stage services in Hmong. The Hmong Christians also attended services in English and interacted with the other worshippers. Their children joined in Sunday School classes with the other children and several people have recounted how they were involved in teaching the Hmong children and how much they enjoyed it. As we have seen, one Hmong family of thirteen attended the Hobart Baptist Church and were involved with church activities. Since moving to Queensland the Hmong in Cairns have established their own church. Initially they held Hmong services at a Baptist church but eventually purchased a former automotive workshop which they have converted into a church. The local Baptist church helped them establish the Hmong church, a member church of the Christian and Missionary

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<sup>32</sup> Helen Lemer, interviewed Hobart, 27 March, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> The significance of these embroideries is discussed above in Chapter 1.

Alliance, providing seating and other items for the building. A number of Hmong families contributed to the purchase price of the building and a Hmong pastor from Thailand was appointed. This arrangement broke down when the pastor tried to restrict contact with the Hmong self-help housing co-operative SPK, because he felt some of their activities were un-Christian. In August 2005, the church was pastorless but still a worshipping community. The establishment of the church took the Hmong away from regular contact with the Baptist congregation with which they worshipped initially, but they appreciated having been involved with that congregation and maintain contact.<sup>34</sup> The establishment of the Hmong church allowed the congregation to worship in their first language, which they are attempting to retain as part of their cultural heritage. It also allowed them to appoint a Hmong pastor and should not be seen as an attempt to distance themselves from others. Rather it is a necessity for them to worship in their own language, since many are not fluent in English, and in particular, the genre of religious language. For the younger Hmong, it is an opportunity to maintain and develop their Hmong language skills.

The Hmong Christians in Brisbane have aligned themselves with an evangelical church which involves travelling across Brisbane for a number of them. They have weekly Hmong bible studies in their own suburbs and appear to have made good friends within the Christian community. The Christian Hmong do not participate in the cultural training at which some of the younger Hmong learn their traditional practices, because they have left the shamanistic practices and ancestor worship rituals behind them since their conversion to Christianity. The Amu, the messianic group of Hmong mentioned earlier, has become distanced from the rest of the Hmong because of its departure from traditional Hmong animism, and has little external interaction with others. It is clear from this, that the Hmong cannot be seen as a homogenous community but rather one where different groups make their way in Australian society in different ways.

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<sup>34</sup> Hmong man M9, interviewed 14 August, 2005.

They are not necessarily closely bonded, even with all other Hmong. Historically the Hmong have, on occasions, taken different sides in conflict situations.

As this thesis indicates, the first Hmong to come to Australia were Colombo Plan students and their background and experience was very different from the Hmong who came as refugees. Vue Thaow commented to Louise Daniels that ‘Even with a common language there is still a time when the new arrival and the sponsors [Hmong] cannot come to terms with certain issues. These new arrivals are those who have been through conditions which none of us could imagine have happened.’<sup>35</sup> Vue Thaow was in fact acknowledging the differences between the privileged minority of Colombo Plan students and the Hmong who came here from the refugee camps, having been subsistence farmers and soldiers. Whilst experiences in Australia have broadened the world view of many Hmong, there is still a noticeable difference between those who have received all their education in Australia and those who have not. In addition to these differences, generational differences have emerged subsequently, as in most migrant communities. As one man said, ‘My children have no connection with Laos.’<sup>36</sup> Despite efforts to maintain customs and traditions, simply being Hmong cannot obscure the differences. This fact is spelled out very clearly in Scott Downman’s thesis, on intra-ethnic conflict.<sup>37</sup> Downman found that, for example, there is considerable conflict between those Hmong who have become Christian and those who maintain their animistic practices, both in Australia and in Thailand.

Travelling to the Atherton Tablelands with a Hmong friend to purchase basil and other herbs from Australian farmers to sell on at Rusty’s markets in Cairns, was an informative experience for me. The farmers were obviously fond of her and teased her about her hard bargaining skills. They directed her to the best places to pick the herbs and laughed when she also picked a particular weed

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<sup>35</sup> L. Daniels, ‘How the Hmong make their home in Tasmania’, *Migration*, June/July 1988, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Hmong man, M8, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Downman, ‘Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong’.

of the *solanaceae* genus (probably *Solanum nigrum*), which is popular with the Hmong and also the Aborigines. She sells this weed to the Aborigines at the markets in Cairns which indicates some kind of interaction between her and them. At another farm, where she purchased parsley to sell on, the farmer, a local history buff, chatted to her and offered me help in relation to the Cairns Hmong, should I need it. As a regular wholesale purchaser of the herbs, which cannot be grown in Cairns because of the heat, this woman has a circle of contacts with whom she has a happy business relationship. This anecdote is included here because when this woman lived in Hobart she impressed people with her determination to communicate despite survival language only and enormous family responsibilities. As her English has increased she is able to interact more, suggesting that interaction develops over time as language skills and understanding of Australian society develop.

Another measure of interaction is marriage out of the Hmong community. Traditionally the Hmong have married exogamously out of their own clan, creating new alliances and relationships. There are a few instances of Hobart Hmong marrying people other than Hmong. One young man did marry a Vietnamese in Hobart, but the marriage did not last very long. One Hobart Hmong woman married a Tasmanian, and she maintains close ties with the Hmong and her husband's family. Another former Hobart Hmong has subsequently married a Vietnamese, apparently happily. Clearly this is evidence of interaction with non-Hmong and involves not just the couple concerned but their families also. Some of the younger generation in Queensland are following practices common amongst other young people and living with partners prior to marriage. In several cases these partners are not Hmong and it is not clear whether they will, in fact, marry.<sup>38</sup> As young Hmong become part of the general community, studying and working with people other than Hmong, these practices will presumably increase.

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<sup>38</sup> Personal observation, Queensland, August, 2005.

As we have seen, like the Vietnamese who came as refugees to Hobart, the Hmong were also subject to racist incidents. These took place in town, at the wharves where they went fishing, and at the homes they moved into. One Hmong man said, 'We experienced it [racism] all the time. We just had to accept it and live with it. It's only 1% of the community.'<sup>39</sup> These racist incidents demonstrate that there are difficulties for refugees in attempting to become involved with the local community. It is difficult for those who experience racism to establish who, in the host community, can be trusted. In order to combat lack of understanding of the Hmong and even some racism, cultural awareness sessions continued at the hospital and with counter staff of Commonwealth and State Government departments, teachers and others. Successive groups of counter staff undertook these programs and became more understanding of the difficulties of the Hmong and others. They began to see that some tasks required of the Hmong were unrealistic, and also became aware of the great effort the Hmong were making to accommodate their requests. Improved understanding assisted with the settlement and interaction of the Hmong, which is evident from feedback offered to teachers at AMES by the Hmong and service providers. These programs also encouraged participants to make use of interpreters through the Telephone Interpreter Service [TIS] which, as indicated by Marie Dungey and others, enabled greater Hmong interaction with their host community in the long term.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the Hmong made good friends in the local community and one of the former Hobart Hmong, now living in Cairns, mentioned how he and his family had regularly gone kangaroo hunting in the bush with a farmer friend and his family.<sup>41</sup> The farmer concerned is still involved with the Hmong community, selling them cows and pigs for ritual purposes when, for example, animals are sacrificed in honour of ancestors. The relationship developed when, a number of years ago, a Hmong man had a chance meeting with this farmer who was herding

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<sup>39</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Marie Dungey, interviewed Margate, 29 March, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

sheep along the road. The Hmong man asked if he could buy a cow from the farmer and when the farmer delivered it to where the Hmong were camping, he was invited to observe the ritual and eat with them. The farmer described it as ‘a bit of an experience’ as the younger Hmong tried to explain the meaning of the ceremony which was taking place. From this point on the Hmong conducted their rituals on the farmer’s land and he showed them where to shoot kangaroos safely and legitimately. He helped about ‘thirty or forty of the Hmong get their [gun] licences.’ The farmer said that the Hmong always brought him a large box of vegetables when they visited. He described them affectionately as his friends, and said some of them still telephone him from Queensland and say how much they miss him. ‘They’re coming up in November for a ceremony,’ the farmer said.<sup>42</sup> This suggests an on-going friendship and a close degree of interaction.

The Hmong men had a football team in Hobart which brought them into contact with other teams in their league. They have continued this activity and have four teams in Brisbane. This allows interaction with other teams and an opportunity to meet up with each other. When I questioned one former member of the Hobart team, he was adamant that the Hmong were not isolated from the mainstream. He mentioned that his sister and brother-in-law had friends among their workmates, and he personally socialised through sport and at school. His sister is several years older and was working when he was at school. He admitted there were difficulties with communication for some of the older Hmong and that it was harder for the men than the women to interact with locals.<sup>43</sup> This contrasts with the experience of some migrant groups such as the Italians and Greeks, where the men are able to interact more easily because they find work and the women were isolated at home and unable to access English classes because of lack of child care.

A Hmong woman living in Brisbane still receives calls and letters from the home tutor she met in Hobart twenty years ago. They have visited each other in

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<sup>42</sup> Tex Rowlands, interviewed by telephone, 14 October, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August 2005.

Melbourne and Queensland and maintain close links. In Queensland, I was asked many questions relating to people the Hmong knew in Tasmania, and the respect for them, and interest in them, was very evident. In many instances I was asked to deliver messages to those concerned on my return to Tasmania. Looking at the younger people who received part of their education in Australia, it is clear that they have interacted with non-Hmong as well as having Hmong friends. However the move to Queensland has been difficult for some. One girl in Brisbane said how much she missed her friends from Ogilvie High School. 'I only talk to my cousins at school now and people here do not know who we are.'<sup>44</sup> This suggests that, even in an Australian context, moving from a familiar situation to a new environment has been difficult for some Hmong and they have not mixed easily. How much more difficult was that first move from refugee camp to Hobart? The Hmong student also added that the support offered, especially by ESL teachers in Hobart, was not available in Brisbane and she struggled with some of her school work.

As the young Hmong in Queensland attempt to balance their new culture with the Hmong culture, they experience tensions typical of second generation migrants and refugees. For some there is no easy resolution and they do not fit into either group. Dillinger talks of this difficulty for South-east Asian young people. They are 'a bridge between two different cultures. They live in two worlds with two sets of languages, rules, expectations and customs.'<sup>45</sup> She goes on to talk of overculturation where they cling to the old, underculturation where they completely embrace the new, alienation where they do not belong to either and bi-culturation where they identify with both by selecting values and beliefs which will help them as they maintain the old and adopt the new.<sup>46</sup> There are a number of young Hmong in Cairns in particular who have 'dropped out', to their

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<sup>44</sup> Hmong girl, F 17, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> B. Dillinger, 'Adolescent Refugees: an ethnographic study of Vietnamese youth in U.S. schools' cited in M. Vang, 'Hmong mothers and daughters: cultural adjustment and conflict', unpublished Masters Thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, 1994, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

parents' dismay. As part of the alienated group, not clinging to the old, neither embracing the mainstream, they are not working or studying and are vulnerable to negative influences. In dropping out they are associating with other non-Hmong and part of an alternative youth culture. Hmong interaction, or lack of it, with the local population needs to be set against these sorts of issues.

A Tasmanian Hmong university student who is studying in Hobart, and has received all his education in Tasmania, talked recently of his local friendships with four non-Hmong and said he does many things with them as long as the activities are acceptable to his father. He said his father is very anxious that he does not get mixed up with the wrong people. This example indicates the respect the young man has for his father as well as his friendships with those other than Hmong. He added that his parents have several good local friends. One is the landlord who leases farmland to them. The young man explained that this landlord 'looks after them and they look after him' in what is not just a business relationship. For example, he mentioned the loan of equipment when theirs broke down.<sup>47</sup> One young man and his father visited Canberra, at the invitation of the National Museum, to be part of the launch of an exhibit on the Hmong which featured their family. They were willing to participate in this way but the wife lacked the confidence to join them. She said she was too shy and did not really like Australian food.<sup>48</sup> When looking for reasons for the Hmong undertaking the secondary migration to Queensland, it seems unlikely that it was because they did not have any meaningful relationships with the locals in Tasmania. As indicated, there are many examples of contact and interaction between the Hmong, which have continued despite secondary migration, in some cases. In fact, a number of Hmong said they were very distressed when saying goodbye to their Tasmanian friends. One former Tasmanian Hmong woman in Innisfail said,

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<sup>47</sup> Hmong man, M13, interviewed Hobart, 28 July, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Hmong woman, F15, interviewed Hobart, 31 June, 2007.

‘When I come to Innisfail I cry, cry, cry. I look for cars with Tasmanian numberplates.’<sup>49</sup>

It seems the Hmong are being encouraged by their leaders to be fully integrated into Australian society. Dr Pao Saykao included the issue of integration in his keynote speech at the 7<sup>th</sup> Hmong National Conference. He said,

At the local and national level, the Hmong need to be fully integrated into the host society. The Australian Hmong have been experimenting this concept as part of the Australian Multicultural society where each ethnic group is encouraged and supported to maintain its identity, culture, religion but at the same time to fully embrace the English language and the law of the land and having tolerance with people from all over the world. This integration must include participation in the host country’s educational system and the social and political systems.<sup>50</sup>

This chapter has demonstrated a number of ways in which the Tasmanian Hmong were and are interacting with the community. This was not obvious to Julian and Downman when they conducted their research, but was revealed at a personal level in discussion with Hmong informants during my own research. It is fair to say that interaction developed slowly as a result of Hmong and Australians having no common language. It grew as the Hmong increased their English language ability and confidence and trust in the host society. However, it also existed even where English was minimal. Despite being a naturally reticent, clanic community relying on their group for all requirements, and despite being victims of racism, the Hmong, like other non-English-speaking migrants, moved outside their comfort zone in order to interact with Tasmanians.

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<sup>49</sup> Hmong woman, F7, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> P. Saykao, ‘The Roots and the Fruits: Hmong identity in the future’, a keynote speech at the Hmong in America conference, April 2002, p. 32.

## Chapter 5

### **The communal farm: dream and reality**

This chapter will examine the quest for a communal farm, which was much desired by the Hmong as a means of attaining employment and economic independence. It will investigate whether the loss of this Tasmanian Hmong ‘dream’, of developing a commercially viable co-operative farm, had any bearing on the departure of the majority of the community for Queensland.

The Hmong who came to Hobart nearly all had a farming background, mainly in the Plain of Jars area of Xieng Khouang Province in north-eastern Laos. Despite their involvement as soldiers in the Secret War and military skills acquired as guerrilla forces, they were most familiar with subsistence farming. Some grew opium as a cash crop, but for the most part they cultivated small areas of mountain-top land, often at considerable distances from their villages. In some cases they would build small shelters next to their crops and stay overnight or for a few days to save the effort of trekking back to their village, which in some cases could be several kilometres away. The shelters also provided protection from the sun, a place to rest at the hottest part of the day and somewhere to prepare and eat meals. The women and children were integral to this swidden (slash and burn) farming and family survival depended on successful agriculture. Crops included highland dry rice, green vegetables, egg-plant, maize, beans and sweet turnips. In addition, they gathered edible leaves, roots and fruit from the countryside to supplement their crops and prepared folk remedies from wayside plants, trees, flowers and animal products. The men did basic welding in order to make small farm tools, and the women sewed clothing and created the intricate Hmong costumes. Since their farms were usually not served by roads they walked along steep paths to their land and to markets, carting implements and produce on their backs in baskets or in small hand-carts. One of the former Tasmanian Hmong in Cairns said, ‘When I first saw a dirt road, I thought it was the track of a large animal. When my parents

told me about cars, I imagined them as large animals that would chase me. It gave me a great respect for vehicles.’<sup>1</sup>

In the refugee camps some of the Hmong gained new skills. It seems there were few organised courses such as the United Nations and other voluntary organisations offered the Vietnamese in the camps in Malaysia and Indonesia, courses that would give them skills for life in their country of resettlement, but there was training for some. This was often related to assistance in the running of the camps and to supporting the camp officials in a variety of ways. As mentioned, the men had occupations which included hospital aide and pharmacy assistant, hospital manager, camp security, including fire-fighting, and interpreter. There was little training for the women, apart from introducing them to a new use for their sewing skills. From this it can be seen that when the Hmong settled in Tasmania, few had any marketable skills, and the skills they had did not match well with the demands of the local labour market. It was especially difficult for them as Tasmania has a limited industrial base, which might have absorbed them as unskilled labour.

The Hmong knew how to grow vegetables, but in Hobart the climate was different and so was the variety of vegetables. Some they recognised, but it was a case of trial and error, and initially the Hmong kept to vegetables with which they were familiar, such as spinach, bok choy, coriander, beans and spring onions. They acquired seeds from Thailand and China and quickly converted back yards into vegetable plots. In some cases landlords gave them access to surplus gardens where the Hmong established larger areas of crops. In the Glenorchy area, in the northern suburbs, there were some old homes with larger than average blocks and even small orchards. As noted earlier, locals generously allowed the Hmong to develop these and along with land made available by churches, schools and other individuals, the Hmong were able to grow vegetables, initially for home consumption and to give away, but later for sale. The landowners were recompensed with boxes of fresh vegetables.

Recognising that the skills they had were not particularly prized by Tasmanian employers, the Hmong realised that their farming skills were the most

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<sup>1</sup> Hmong man, M16, interviewed Innisfail, 24 August, 2005.

likely to bring them an income. This parallels the ‘pragmatic economic response to the demands of American social and economic life’ described by Sheehan. American Hmong argued that by farming vegetables, they would always have fresh food and be able to save money.<sup>2</sup> The Tasmanian Hmong wanted to take this idea further and were anxious to create an economic niche and ‘develop business acumen and entrepreneurial drive.’<sup>3</sup> They had a dream of having a co-operative farm and this inspired them in their search for suitable land somewhere not too far from Hobart. Along with that hope, there was talk of exporting vegetables when the farm was well-established and even of supplying overseas markets. There was also a plan proposed to establish a Hmong village as a tourist attraction, to set up an Asian bakery, a steakhouse, produce craft goods and special herbs and spices.<sup>4</sup> The dream was therefore multifaceted and anticipated a lot of hard work.

Many of the Tasmanians interviewed for this thesis talked of being impressed by the Hmong work ethic and there was no lack of willingness from Hmong families to help develop the idea of a co-operative farm. A number of the Hmong had cars, and some of the women had also learnt to drive in Hobart, so there was transport available to get them out of the city to rural areas. The search for a farm continued for some time and applications for government funding were completed with assistance from the MRC, in the hope of establishing a sizeable market garden where a number of families could cultivate the land, share equipment and purchase seeds together. The funding to set up the Hmong as commercial vegetable farmers was granted by the Commonwealth government, and land at Macquarie Plains in the Derwent Valley, north of Hobart, was purchased by two local businessmen who wanted to help the Hmong realise their dream. There were two perspectives on this project, according to Irene Matthews, Community Development Officer at the MRC from 1988 to 1999.

There was a cultural mis-match with the original project. Those providing the funds for the project could not step back and look objectively at the Hmong. They didn’t have a common understanding

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<sup>2</sup> E. Sheehan, “‘Greens’ Hmong Gardens, Farms and Land Ownership in America: Constructing Environment and Identity in the Carolinas”, <http://home.vicnet.au/~lao/laostudy/garden.htm>, accessed 5 May, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> C. Bantick, ‘Closed life of the clan’, *Hobart Mercury*, 24 April, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Vue Thaow has purchased land on the Atherton Tablelands where he has made preliminary preparations and hopes to establish the Hmong village which he was unable to build in Tasmania.

with the Hmong. They were asking the Hmong to plant crops they were not familiar with and did not wish to grow. There was a mismatch of objectives and understanding. Vue [Thaow] was caught in it; he understood the Western way but his people didn't. They needed each other and the clans.<sup>5</sup>

This episode is reminiscent of the situation around Fresno, California, when Hmong, who were settled in a farming region because of their farming background, could not obtain work because they realised they did not understand the sophisticated farming methods employed by the Americans. Sheehan notes that the Hmong have a world view which

significantly influences their treatment of the natural environment. It informs their decisions about land purchases, the siting of buildings within a property and the type of agricultural technologies they retain. Their relationships with “non-human nature” are governed by their beliefs about relationships between themselves as human beings and the cosmos.<sup>6</sup>

In addition it appears that many Hmong gardens in the Carolinas in the United States retain some of the environmental practices reminiscent of sustainable Asian upland farming. Sheehan describes a ‘broad diversity of plants, non-linear mixed variety layouts, interplanted nutrient and seasonably complementary species...organic fertilizers such as animal manures, vegetable composts and ash.’<sup>7</sup> Like Hmong gardens/farms in Tasmania, those in the Carolinas are mostly organic.

In Tasmania, the Hmong have found that there is no need for insecticides because of the cool climate. Similarly the tools used for farming there and here, include items such as dibble sticks, machetes and knives. Indeed, when interviewing Tasmanian Hmong for this thesis, the home-made hand tools were much in evidence and some had been sent by relatives overseas. The Hmong prefer their traditional tools and implements rather than those available in Australia, although they modify Australian tools to mimic those they are familiar with. One farmer had the ‘mental idea’ of a dibble stick with him when he came to Tasmania. He made a tool for his farm by stripping the bark from a hardwood sapling. The dibble stick is a versatile implement; sharpened at both ends it can be used for a

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<sup>5</sup> Irene Matthews, interviewed, Hobart, 6 April, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Sheehan, ““Greens” Hmong Gardens’, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

variety of digging and planting purposes. It allows some kinds of digging to be carried out without bending and is a speedy alternative to local tools.<sup>8</sup> Sheehan's findings correspond with the situation described by Elaine Reeves, who quotes Xao Thaow as saying 'We almost know every plant by name. I think that's the crucial thing. We tend the garden so often that every vegetable, every cabbage, every bok choy is touched by hand'.<sup>9</sup>

Lee argues that 'throughout Hmong history, Hmong agriculture and the associated economic system have been the determining forces affecting and giving rise to many social customs and religious beliefs.'<sup>10</sup> This places agriculture as a paramount aspect of Hmong social, cultural and spiritual life and suggests that there was more at stake in relation to the communal farm than just making a living. Clearly this approach to farming is very different from the economic rationale which guided the financial backers of the Tasmanian Hmong farm. Despite this, the planning for the farm was in progress, staff had been appointed and commenced training, when the Hmong consulted a lawyer for advice on the lease they were about to sign. They were told that the lease was not satisfactory and advised that they should not sign it. This created bad feeling on both sides, and considerable disappointment and misunderstanding, and the project fell through.

There is no suggestion that the Hmong could not have made a success of the farm. Indeed if we look at the Hmong in French Guiana, who developed farms as a means of feeding themselves and creating an income, it is clear that they have been very successful. According to Clarkin, almost every adult farms at least part of the time. Schools are closed on Wednesdays so children can help parents prepare for market. What is more, the Hmong in French Guiana produce 60 per cent of the country's fruit and vegetables.<sup>11</sup> In 1977, the French organisation, the National Cooperation Committee, gave them two years to achieve self-sufficiency there, awarding them 50 ff (French francs) per day for their individual needs. Wise stewards as they proved to be, they pooled 47 ff to buy tools and lived on 3 ff. In two years the Hmong were not only self-sufficient but they had built a second

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<sup>8</sup> Dibble stick (*hmuv*), object biography, National Museum, Canberra.

<sup>9</sup> Xao Thaow cited in E.Reeves, 'A labour of love', *Hobart Mercury*, 31 October, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> G. Lee, 'The shaping of tradition: agriculture and Hmong society', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005-6, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> P. Clarkin, 'Hmong resettlement in French Guiana', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005-6, p.5.

village. Their original village at Cacao is now French Guiana's second major tourist attraction.<sup>12</sup> According to one of my informants, a Hmong from French Guiana who visited relatives in Queensland said that the Hmong have more freedom in French Guiana. They were given an area of jungle, a free farm for each person, and they pay taxes annually. Their income is tied to the Euro and they are doing well financially and flourishing.<sup>13</sup> In France, however, the agricultural projects which were attempted with the Hmong were less successful.<sup>14</sup> The Hmong were initially settled in forested areas but relocated to towns where conditions were better. Whilst many are involved in market gardening in southern France, others are living in larger cities such as Paris and even making a living as taxi-drivers.<sup>15</sup>

The grant of \$35,000 to develop the skills needed to farm the land purchased by the two Tasmanian businessmen was eventually re-allocated by the Department of Employment, Industrial Relations and Training [DEIRT] to the Hmong Co-operative Society in 1991, to fund enterprise development under a Local Enterprise Initiative [LEI]. Irene Matthews said that DEIRT was looking for alternatives to the failed project. Because the MRC tended to work from a welfare model, she worked after hours in a voluntary capacity.<sup>16</sup> Previously she had set up 'The Workshop', which was a skills exchange and befriending program to reduce migrant isolation. According to Irene, it 'showcased that people had skills and that they were normal people in abnormal circumstances.' She added that the fact that there were few guidelines for the project was a blessing in disguise because it allowed her 'the flexibility to tailor things to suit'.<sup>17</sup> She consulted with the Hmong community and asked many questions. She found 'these questions opened ever new abysses.'<sup>18</sup> She set up sessions which produced a wish list and an inventory of the personal, trade and other relevant skills of the community, as an

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<sup>12</sup> E. Martin, 'Hmong in French Guyana. An improbable gamble', *Refugees*, July, 1992, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> M. Mignot, 'Refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, 1975-1993', in R. Cohen, ed., *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 456.

<sup>15</sup> K. Yang, 'Hmong diaspora of the post-war period', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, 12, 3, 2003, p. 279.

<sup>16</sup> Irene Matthews, interviewed Hobart, 6 April, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Irene Matthews, Presentation to service providers on the Grant-in-Aid, MRC Southern Tasmania Inc., 1992, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

initial activity for them, but found that it was mostly the men who became involved. Culturally this was to have been expected.

In her interview Irene explained her *modus operandi*:

I tried to put myself in their [the Hmong's] shoes. Vue tried to marry two cultures but it was a difficult path to tread. I only realised that afterwards. Vue had a great grasp of the Western perspective but it was a difficult mindset to communicate to his community. I tried a model of parallel development, a concept borrowed from the parallel play of my psychology background. My philosophy was to transmit learning; people had to learn for themselves. We couldn't write things down so always we had to demonstrate. You can't have one person carrying the burden either, so we focused on Vue's son-in-law and Moua [a young Hmong man] who were to have been employed in the original project. There was democratic action. They were very organised and I asked permission to meet with them. I asked the women if they would allow me to meet with their husbands. I believe my Asian background helped. Having come from a developing country I had an idea of what their aspirations might be. Also the family stuff. I was in their comfort zone.<sup>19</sup>

Of necessity, without the original farm, the initial plans and the long-held dream of a Hmong communal farm underwent modification under the new arrangements. The major part of the project was the farm some of the Hmong purchased at Boyer, an area on the Derwent River, about 20 km from Hobart. Irene helped the Boyer farmers sort out problems. Irene told the Hmong 'I will come with you but won't do things for you'.

It needed a lot of support. We (Moua and I) would meet. He became very skilled. He dealt with the police, contracts etc. Technical and Further Education became involved and that was another part of the project. There was Incat (welding and employment), horticulture and sewing.<sup>20</sup>

The two part-time Hmong workers mentioned were employed to act as employment and enterprise facilitators. A management committee of clan leaders or representatives was formed to drive the project. The early meetings covered modern business practices, accounting methods, financing and marketing strategies, all concepts which were new to the Hmong or provided information to which they had not previously had access. According to Irene Matthews,

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<sup>19</sup> Irene Matthews, interviewed Hobart, 6 April, 2006. Irene's background is Malaysian Chinese.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

There were lots of meetings and they worked as a community. As they were so reliant on the spoken word they kept everyone informed, with Xao [Thaow] as interpreter. I said “I can’t do your work for you but I can teach you things.” We negotiated space at Glenorchy City Council [offices] and they supported us in that space. I needed them [the Hmong] to feel confident and comfortable in government premises. We tried to mainstream and avoid a welfare approach. I visited them regularly. I told them to get people to come and use the space. I got them to work as welfare officers for their community from those offices. The farm was one strand of the project. There were traffic infringements, racism, an intruder in a home and other problems to deal with. I showed them how to access help and services. There was alcohol abuse, post traumatic stress and one instance of domestic violence. It was necessary to have two welfare workers who could then mutually support each other. It was an attempt to be all things to all people and to take the stress off Vue.<sup>21</sup>

As the project developed it became clear that there were other needs in the Hmong community. Because some of the older Hmong and the women in particular, were missing out on training courses because of family responsibilities, funding was obtained from the Office of the Status of Women. This allowed a playgroup program to be established at the West Moonah Community House, with the idea of developing cooperative childcare, thus freeing some of the women to participate in the LEI. Another spin-off from the funding was a schoolwork support program, aimed at assisting Hmong and other grades 9-12 students from non-English backgrounds with their homework. In 1992 Irene wrote, ‘From a single-focus beginning, the LEI project has expanded to encompass the development of the [Hmong] community as a whole.’ She believed that this type of support was ‘an essential part of supporting their continued survival as a cohesive community.’<sup>22</sup>

With a change of staff at the Migrant Resource Centre there was a change in the attitude of the Board.

The Hmong and other things helped to change the more traditional welfare-oriented views of the Board, marrying their [the Hmong’s] strengths to pathways open to them. There was the housing co-operative and their mutual assistance fund. The Hmong men, Xao, Vue and Moua, had exceptional leadership skills. They accepted leadership and responsibility and sacrificed themselves for their people. They influenced people to take an interest in refugees and drew attention to refugee settlement. I taught the older women who

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Irene Matthews, presentation to service providers on the Grant-in-Aid, 1992, p. 6.

ran out of allotted hours at AMES while you [the writer] taught the men [a voluntary English class at a Hmong home]. They generated much community goodwill.<sup>23</sup>

The Boyer land was farmed very successfully and, as well as supplying Salamanca market, there were contracts with supermarkets, but in winter the soil froze and no winter crops could be grown. This shortened growing season meant that the owners eventually sold the farm, took their share of the sale price and moved on.

Another group leased land from the Youth Corporation in Kingston, at Griston Farm, south of Hobart. Unfortunately it was poor quality farmland, subject to heavy frost and suffered possum damage. In addition it did not offer economies of scale. Others leased land from a Tasmanian farmer at Richmond, just out of Hobart to the north-west, where Hmong are still farming. By this time the Hmong stalls, affectionately known as Hmong Alley, at the Saturday market at Salamanca Place in Hobart, were a feature, despite the Hmong's initial hesitancy to obtain stalls, and Hobartians became accustomed to a number of vegetables that they had previously not been able to purchase.

The teachers at AMES responded to the expanding LEI and the growth of Hmong Alley by offering an 'English for Salamanca' class at the Adult Migrant English Centre, where the Hmong learnt language to help them run their market stalls. They learned to answer the question, 'How do you cook it?' with replies like 'Cook it with a little water like silver beet.' They also learned how to write the price signs to go on the stalls. The vegetables were of a very high quality and since the Hmong used chicken manure and no chemical fertilisers they were also organic, although not officially registered as such. Before market day the vegetables were carefully prepared and cleaned and well-presented. The vegetable quality and appearance impressed the local population and many people would only buy vegetables from the Hmong. Because everything was picked the day before the market, the vegetables stayed fresh longer than those purchased in the supermarkets. The displays at the market were attractive and tourists took photographs and film. Not all of them knew that the stall-holders were Hmong and, like some locals, confused them with Vietnamese or Chinese. The Hmong did not like being mistaken for Vietnamese since they had been the enemy in Laos. They

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<sup>23</sup> Irene Matthews, interviewed Hobart, 6 April 2006.

found it hard to understand that the difference in appearance was not obvious to some Australians. Julian considers that Salamanca Market provided a legitimate context in which the Hmong could manifest their cultural identity. In addition to economic success, the market offered an opportunity for them to do what was familiar. At the same time however, she suggests that there may have been a kind of public exploitation, promoting their presence there as an indicator of the inclusiveness of Tasmanian society and a demonstration of acceptance of ethnic difference.<sup>24</sup>

The discovery that a Hmong family, who felt displaced in Sydney, had moved to Innisfail and started banana farming influenced the Tasmanian Hmong to look further afield. That family learnt about Australian production methods from local farmers who admired their determination. Some Hobart Hmong therefore decided they would like to investigate opportunities in far North Queensland. In 1988, Vue Thaow drove ten Hmong men to Cairns to have a look for themselves. He said, in retrospect, that the Hmong had not really appreciated that they could grow good vegetables all year round in Tasmania.<sup>25</sup> He urged the group not to move until they had an appropriate plan, and when they returned to Hobart, the majority said they would not go to Queensland. However, while Vue Thaow was out of the country later in the year, some of them left for Innisfail, hoping to find better opportunities. Their plans to farm in Queensland have not really been realised because of water shortages in Brisbane, the negative effects of big operators on small banana producers, the vagaries of climate and the need to use large amounts of pesticides and fungicides in Far North Queensland. The Hmong have had to revise their plans to a large extent. Whilst some families have farms, either purchased or leased, they do not provide an adequate income and the Hmong have had to diversify into other areas.

Two Hmong families have returned to Hobart and are market-gardening near Richmond. They literally walked off the farm in Innisfail, leaving their brother to grub out the bananas, as required by the Agriculture Department, and to decide what his options were. Another Hmong farmer has returned to Tasmania from

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<sup>24</sup> Roberta Julian quoted in C. Bantick 'Closed life of the clan', *Hobart Mercury*, 24 April, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> E. Reeves, 'Vue, Colombo Plan Success Story', *Alumni News*, University of Tasmania, 20, 2001, p. 3.

Brisbane and is now owner of a small farm of about 40 acres near Richmond in southern Tasmania, where he is growing vegetables. He has realised his dream of farming by returning to Tasmania, but many of the Hmong who left have not. Few Hmong are making a living from farming in Cairns and Innisfail and none of the Hmong who left for Brisbane are farming. The Hmong had dreamed of becoming self-sufficient in Tasmania, which many local Tasmanians also hoped could be achieved. The sense of loss experienced by some of the Hmong when their dream failed to eventuate resonated with Hmong and others alike. Despite its success, the alternative LEI project did not compensate for the loss of the original dream. The disappointment seems likely to have been influential in causing the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong to Queensland. This is not to say that the Hmong would not have been influenced by the stories of potential economic benefits from banana growing in Queensland anyway, but, had their Tasmanian cooperative farm become a reality, allowing them to grow vegetables successfully on a larger scale, they may not have succumbed to their disappointment and looked elsewhere for what they perceived as more lucrative farming opportunities. The loss of the dream was compounded by lack of unskilled and semi-skilled employment in Tasmania and it is clear that this combination affected the Hmong, and fuelled their desire to move in the hope of finding better economic opportunities. The dream of communal commercial farming slowly faded as the Hmong moved away.

## Chapter 6

### Secondary migration

This chapter considers the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong in relation to theories of migration. It examines the move to Queensland against the historic migration of the Hmong in China and their traditional movements in Laos. It looks at other diasporic secondary migrations of Hmong as it seeks to assess why the majority of Hmong left Tasmania.

Before discussing the secondary migration of the Hmong from Tasmania, it is necessary to consider migration in general and refugee movements in particular. Migration can be defined as ‘to go from one place to settle in another, especially in a foreign country’.<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Hage talks of the capacity to move, the need to move and desire to move as being aspects of a trans-national migrant culture.<sup>2</sup> He says that while there may be motivation to move, there has to be the capacity also. These aspects underpin the spirit in which people move. Migration takes place often when the migrant feels there is nothing for him in his home region. He migrates for the possibility things might be better and Hage says this is what migration is all about: ‘potentiality and the transformative power of economics’.<sup>3</sup> In the case of refugees the situation is somewhat different. The desire to move may be present but the capacity depends only partially on the refugee. Those chosen to re-locate from refugee camps have usually undergone considerable scrutiny to determine whether they have the language of their new country, whether they might be a health risk, whether they have work-potential, whether they would resettle successfully, and so on. The actual movement of refugees is determined by the UN along with the country they hope to go to. The host country can make the rules about who they will accept and who they will refuse. For example, in the 1980s Switzerland was one of the few countries which would accept disabled people from refugee camps.<sup>4</sup> The voluntary

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<sup>1</sup> W. McLeod, ed., *The New Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus*, London and Glasgow, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> G. Hage, ‘On being pulled, pushed, propelled or just left to sink: modes of mobility in the global system’, paper presented at the Tasmanian Historical Studies Conference, Making Tasmania Home, 4 September, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Information obtained by the author at the time of settling the first Vietnamese refugees in Hobart.

repatriation program from Thai refugee camps back to Laos is an indication of the inability of many Hmong to obtain refugee status, and/or the inability to find a third country willing to accept them. Hmong in Australia, like others in diasporic destinations, were separated from relatives who could not get out of the camps and, eventually, with the closure of the camps, had little alternative but to agree to so-called 'voluntary repatriation'. Some created an alternative by disappearing into the existing Hmong community in Thailand or settling at Wat Tham Krabok under the protection of the charismatic abbot, Phra Chamroon Parnchand.<sup>5</sup> Others may have crossed the border into Laos independently and joined 'rebels' in the jungle, where they play 'cat and mouse' with the Lao authorities.<sup>6</sup> Likewise they were separated from other family members who went to other destinations.

Hage talks of migrants being pulled, pushed or propelled. If pulled, the force is coming from the country to which the migrant will go. If pushed, the force stays behind when the migrant leaves. If propelled, the force goes with the migrant and there is a permanent relationship between them.<sup>7</sup> In the case of the Hmong studied in this thesis, the pull factor was the Hmong leader Vue Thaow who was already in Tasmania as an international student when the communists took over Laos. He sponsored close relatives and clan members who subsequently sponsored others, a kind of chain migration. Vue is quoted as saying, 'There was a family reunion policy and everyone could sponsor close relatives and then there was a chain reaction. All the Hmong people who set foot in Tasmania were through me one way or another.'<sup>8</sup>

The push factor was that the Hmong finally realised, contrary to what they had imagined, that the Western world could not change what had happened in Laos and the communists were there to stay. In some cases the Hmong had been in the refugee camps for as long as fifteen years, hoping one day to return to Laos. Another push factor was the compulsory closure of the refugee camps in

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Hmong. An Introduction to their History and Culture. The refugee experience in Thailand', <http://www.cal.org/co/hmong/hthai.html>, accessed 21 January, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> 'Hmong come down from Laos Hills', *Sunday Tasmanian*, 5 June, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Hage, 'On being pushed, pulled or propelled or just left to sink.'

<sup>8</sup> Vue Thao, cited in E. Reeves, 'Vue, Colombo Plan Success Story', *Alumni News*, University of Tasmania, 20, 2001, p. 2.

Thailand in 1994. The Hmong had the choice of voluntary repatriation to Laos under UNHCR supervision or settlement in a third country. The Tasmanian Hmong chose the latter, fearing that they would not receive fair treatment from the Lao government. Those who chose voluntary resettlement were re-established in villages such as Ban Km 52 near Vientiane. When I visited this village, it was clear that it is not based on clan or family, like traditional Hmong villages, but a much larger agglomeration of houses. The houses, some constructed of brick, were of better standard than many Hmong houses that I had observed on visits to traditional villages, but facilities were minimal. Some had electricity, but not all. The village straddled the main road north from Vientiane to Luang Prabang and a market had grown up fronting the main road. Repatriation was a threat to many Hmong and the impetus for finally leaving the camps for resettlement. Stories of victimisation in the villages and complaints that the repatriation process was not properly monitored by the UNHCR caused the Hmong in the camps to fear victimisation by the Lao government if they returned to Laos. The possibility of 'voluntary repatriation', therefore, represented another aspect of the push factor.

The propelling factor which Hage has identified is best explained as the Hmong clan leaders, and others who were part of the exodus, urging their compatriots to leave for Australia. They subsequently maintained a leadership role in Australia. In a number of cases, as stated earlier, younger members of families had been urging their elders to leave but they had resisted. These younger people then left for Tasmania with their parents, so continued the relationship as 'propellants'. Many reasons can be found for the flow of refugees from the world's trouble spots and other writers refer to the concepts of push, pull and propellant. Clearly it is political events which initially create refugees. As others have indicated, the reaction to intolerable, life-threatening situations is to flee and the overwhelming force is that of 'push'. Destination choice is rarely an option and this is one of the distinguishing factors between refugees and migrants. Desbarats considers that 'these substantial [refugee] population movements possess a dynamic of their own...'.<sup>9</sup> This is not the place to become

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<sup>9</sup> J. Desbarats, 'Indochinese Resettlement in the United States', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 75, 4, December, 1985 p. 524.

involved in arguments for developing an analytical framework in which to study movements of refugees but her comments on secondary migration are pertinent. Desbarats notes that secondary migration in the USA has increased the concentration of refugees in a few states and moved the centre of gravity of the Indo-Chinese population further west. Clearly the movement of refugees has a different set of underlying influences from the movement of the population at large and is more about specific destinations than specific origins.<sup>10</sup> The situation in the United States was different from that in Australia in that there was an initial policy of dispersed settlement to ensure the load of resettlement did not overburden particular regions. Dispersal in Australia occurred because the Hmong initially joined clan members who were studying in different parts of Australia under the Colombo Plan. The dispersal in the United States suggests that initial settlement takes place in what can be described as a constrained context. Subsequent secondary migration is influenced by the desire to reconnect with family and clan, and by the differences in social security and other kinds of support which vary from state to state, along with better employment prospects. Whatever the reason to move, secondary migration represents an optional stage of resettlement where personal choice plays a part. Because of this expression of preference, secondary migration can be viewed in the same way as standard interregional migration. In considering Indo-Chinese relocation however, Desbarats notes that the extended family unit assumes paramount importance and probably takes precedence over purely materialistic concerns in view of the traumatic experiences of flight and resettlement. A number of factors have influenced Indo-Chinese secondary migration in the United States including climate, presence of Asian communities, increased public assistance, income and urban areas. Secondary moves made by refugees are mainly influenced by the desire for economic survival, be this employment or an acceptable alternative.<sup>11</sup>

Secondary migration within the United States is not the only example of movement made by the Hmong, after their initial resettlement. For example 5,000 Hmong have left France for the United States and French Guiana. Other Hmong in France have relocated to the region around Nîmes where they now

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 528.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 529.

dominate local vegetable production.<sup>12</sup> In addition, some of the Hmong women in Germany have married Hmong from France and moved there. Others have married US soldiers of Hmong ancestry and migrated to the United States.<sup>13</sup> Hmong families who initially went to New Zealand, relocated to Innisfail.<sup>14</sup> Sixty Hmong, who were originally settled in South Australia, moved to Victoria where they almost doubled the size of the Victorian Hmong Community.<sup>15</sup>

As we have seen, the Hmong have always been people on the move, as a result of discrimination and hostility in China. They met with confrontation when they first encountered the Chinese in northern China.<sup>16</sup> It has been suggested that they were in the Yellow River basin before the Chinese inhabited the area and subsequently migrated.<sup>17</sup> Quincy provides further clues to the migration of Hmong, describing them as the most adventurous of migrants,<sup>18</sup> and, in terms of the Tasmanian Hmong, this same sense of adventure influenced some who departed for Queensland. They retreated to the mountaintops because of marginalisation and became montagnards, practising swidden agriculture. Over the centuries they eventually migrated into Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and Myanmar. Because of their style of agriculture, they moved from their mountain-top settlements to new villages when the soil became depleted. Every five or six years they would re-locate and establish new farms.

The first migration undertaken by the Tasmanian Hmong was within their own country in most cases. Familiar with frequent 'moving on', during the Secret War many left their villages or followed soldier relatives to congregate in Long Cheng, virtually refugees in their own country. They were dependent on the Americans for all their food and shelter because their villages and farms could no longer sustain them due to the disruption of the war. The next migration, the

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<sup>12</sup> G. Lee, 'The Shaping of Traditions: Agriculture and Hmong Society', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 2005, 6, p. 25.

<sup>13</sup> T. Yang, 'Hmong of Germany: Preliminary report on the Resettlement of Lao Hmong Refugees in Germany', *Hmong Studies Journal*, 4, 2003, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> G. Lee, 'Culture and Settlement', in N. Tapp and G. Lee eds, *The Hmong of Australia, Culture and Diaspora*, p.13.

<sup>15</sup> J. Helmore, 'Hmong: The smallest ethnic community in the country!', *Ethnic Communities Now*, 1986, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> W. Geddes, *Migrants of the Mountains. The Cultural Ecology of the Blue Hmong (Hmong Njua) of Thailand*, Oxford, 1976, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> K. Quincy, *Hmong, History of a People*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Cheney, 1988, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

result of intolerable conditions under the communists in Laos, took them across the border to the refugee camps in Thailand. The next move was settlement in a third country as part of Australia's refugee intake, leading to the establishment of the small Hmong community in Hobart, Tasmania.

In analysing secondary migration by the Hmong of the diaspora, Cheu Thao notes that they have always moved when the soil of their farms ceased to be productive or disease affected their village.<sup>19</sup> The Hmong have always moved in hope and expectation of improving their living conditions. In some cases the whole village moved to a new site or one or two families moved to a different, existing village. They would try to escape disease or malevolent spirits and spirits of the forest, which they believed caused death.<sup>20</sup> There was a different understanding of disease and no awareness of the connection between dirt and disease. A new village site would be chosen according to soil quality, absence of disease, the 'luckiness' of the site and its nearness to the old site. There was a constant dream of finding new, rich land. Other Hmong, known or unknown were always greeted with 'Were your crops good this year?' and 'Is anyone sick?', as information was stored for future reference.<sup>21</sup> A lucky site was one where good fortune came to all, where the spirits blessed the villagers, where animals flourished and people stayed healthy and strong. Such a site could keep people static for up to twenty years, whereas other sites might cause people to move after two or three years. The men would go ahead and build houses then return for the others. The villagers would carry what they could, load their ponies if they had them, tie the pigs, cows and buffaloes with lead ropes and leave everything else behind. Ideally the new site would be no more than two days walk, so that there was less opportunity for forest spirits to steal the children.<sup>22</sup> Thaow says there was sadness at leaving the old site because of the association with rivers, creeks, mountains and houses. When moving to an existing village,

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<sup>19</sup> C. Thao, 'Hmong Migration and Leadership in Laos and in the United States', in T. Downing and D. Olney, eds, *The Hmong in the West*, Washington D.C. 1982, p.105.

<sup>20</sup> R. Cooper, *The Hmong*, Bangkok, 1996, p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> C. Thao, 'Hmong Migration and Leadership', p.101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

however, there was an opportunity to strengthen clan ties and increase influence and power.<sup>23</sup>

Referring to moving patterns in the United States, Thao says they are fundamentally the same as traditional Hmong relocations and undertaken for improvement in their situation.<sup>24</sup> Whilst the circumstances are radically different the reunification is, in fact, the continuation of a process begun in Laos. After the experience of being displaced in their own region, either at Long Cheng or Sam Thong, where the Hmong were thrown together and dependent on US aid, relationships and networks were extended and went beyond clan and family. Fleeing Laos at different times, the Hmong planned to link up in Thailand. On arrival in the refugee camps they might be greeted with a message saying 'If you have come to this place, follow us, otherwise we will never see one another other again'. In America the Hmong were widely dispersed because of government policy, and plans to move were made as soon as contact with family or clan was achieved. This should be seen as the completion of something started in Laos, long before.<sup>25</sup> Thao argues that reunification migration of Hmong in America should not be considered as true secondary migration, as the term is usually used, because it is the last stage of a process begun in Laos. American sponsors of the Hmong had no idea of the long-term planning implicit in reunification migration and mistakenly considered the moves as arbitrary.<sup>26</sup> The term betterment migration is used to describe moves to improve one's position and this is identical to the motivation for movement in Laos. Sometimes the move was prompted by community tension such as a murder that took place in Orange County.<sup>27</sup> Often a preliminary reconnoitre was made and an assessment of the number of family and clan members made prior to the move. Discussion followed and General Vang Pao was sometimes called on for advice. Temporary accommodation was provided in the new area following hospitality practices in Laos. Betterment migration has resulted in new configurations of Hmong in America and concentrations in cities like Minneapolis/St Paul.

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<sup>23</sup> Thao, 'Hmong Migration and Leadership', p. 104.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.107.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

It has been argued that additional economic motives have played a role in all the Hmong migrations, including the major exodus to refugee camps in Thailand, and political factors were compounded by economic ones.<sup>28</sup> Cooper sees the major exodus of Hmong from China as a precedent for large-scale movement, where the Hmong could not continue their way of life without interference from the Chinese authorities. Even when fear of persecution diminished, the movement of Hmong continued. This was because there was a belief that resources were better in the new location. Resource scarcity existed in Hmong areas of China and this was resolved by moving to an area of fresh resources. This created an improved environmental balance and the movement of Hmong out of China diminished. Cooper argues that this applied when Hmong moved out of Laos to Thailand also, but in that case there was no political motive evident.<sup>29</sup>

If the number of Hmong totally dependent on the Americans in Long Cheng, plus the number of Hmong soldiers fighting with the Pathet Lao, is taken into consideration, it is clear that resource scarcity existed again during the Secret War. However it did not lead to Hmong fleeing the country. It would seem that the provision of aid and paid employment offered by the Americans was, in itself, an economic incentive.<sup>30</sup> With the departure of the Americans there was no substitute for their provisions. The Xieng Khouang area was decimated and bomb-ridden, and trees had given way to imperata grass, which made hand cultivation almost impossible, so return to this area was problematic.<sup>31</sup> In addition there was a drought in Laos in 1977 and a disastrous flood in 1978 when Laos had to ask for international assistance.<sup>32</sup> Cooper's argument is that slash and burn cultivation in Laos was proving inadequate even before 1975 and had the Hmong remained in Laos they might have starved. He bases this on what he saw as Programme Officer for UNHCR between 1980 and 1983 and previous experience in northern Thailand. He makes it clear that there was persecution and

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<sup>28</sup> R. Cooper, 'The Hmong of Laos: Economic Factors in Refugee Exodus and Return', in G. Hendricks et al., eds, *The Hmong in Transition*, New York, 1986, p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

fear of reprisals, which of themselves were enough reason to leave Laos, but in addition there was a very strong economic motive.

The secondary migration from Tasmania to Queensland meant that eventually there were only three Hmong families left in Hobart. Some of those who left did so because other relatives were leaving and they wanted to keep the family and clan members together. Others did so because of the insistence of clan leaders and family members. Dao says that Hmong suffer loss of morale if they become isolated. He comments on the astonishment of the host society in welcoming countries when the Hmong have tried to regroup and exhibited considerable mobility.<sup>33</sup> In reality it should not have come as a surprise. The secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong should be seen as two different phases although not necessarily discrete. The initial phase occurred after groups of Hmong went to investigate the possibility of moving to Far North Queensland to become farmers. Many Tasmanian Hmong believed there were better economic opportunities in Queensland and farming there would be in a familiar climate and utilise familiar skills. There was the added incentive of aspiring to replicate the financial success of the Sydney Hmong who were the first family to move to Innisfail.

When I interviewed Tasmanian Hmong informants in Cairns, it was evident to me that the topography is very reminiscent of Luang Prabang in Northern Laos. Standing at the airport, the view is of a ring of hills just as it is in Luang Prabang, and tropical vegetation is evident. Whilst none of my informants said this was a reason for being in Cairns, they did comment on the similarity.<sup>34</sup> They have even 'claimed' two hills, calling them Boy and Girl Mountains, reminding them of similar mountains in Northern Laos. Driving around Cairns to meet informants, I saw other areas which were very reminiscent of Laos, both in topography and vegetation. The Hmong farms are out of Cairns and Innisfail and, whilst they do not really provide a living, they offer an opportunity to grow vegetables for home use, sometimes as a source of income, and a quiet place to meet friends and relatives. It is also possible to perform ceremonies involving the

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<sup>33</sup> Y. Dao, 'Why did the Hmong leave Laos?', in T. Downing and D. Olney, eds, *The Hmong in the West. Observations and Reports*, Minnesota, 1982, p.4.

<sup>34</sup> Hmong man M9, interviewed Cairns, 14 August, 2005.

slaughter of animals for rituals, without causing offence to neighbours. Some farmers keep pig dogs for hunting wild boar which damage their crops. Hunting was a popular activity in Laos also.

While this initial exodus was taking place, other Hmong were arriving from refugee camps in Thailand as a result of 'camp closure' and so the departure of the Hmong to Queensland was not immediately obvious. Some of the new arrivals even took over the homes of those who were leaving. However, after the last arrivals from the refugee camps in 1994, the enforced closure of the camps in Thailand, and the voluntary repatriation of Hmong to Laos, it became obvious that the Hobart Hmong community was shrinking. There was an accompanying loss of infrastructure jobs, such as teacher-aides, bilingual information officers, interpreters and child-care workers. Hmong Alley, the row of stalls where the Hmong sold their vegetables at Salamanca Market, grew markedly smaller and locals began asking where the Hmong had gone. Interviewed by the Hobart Mercury, Chue Thaow described the added pressure on the remaining Hmong, to try to maintain vegetable production and to supply stalls at Salamanca. She is quoted as saying that Fridays had become particularly arduous, requiring a marathon of picking and bundling. The day started with picking before 8am and bundling continued late into the night, as late as 3am on Saturday.<sup>35</sup>

In 1988, in relation to bringing more Hmong from the refugee camps, Vue Thaow commented that the aim was to achieve a community of at least 500 people, the critical mass considered to be necessary for the community to be viable and to be able to pursue its economic and cultural aims.<sup>36</sup> This followed concerns of the Hmong-Australia Society, expressed to the Australian government in 1983, that cultural practitioners from the camps were needed by those Hmong already in Australia. By 2003, Vue Thaow was expressing his disappointment that there was no longer a hope of having a viable Hmong community in Tasmania.<sup>37</sup> These comments followed the major exodus to Queensland, which occurred in 2002 and 2003. This subsequent exodus to

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<sup>35</sup> A. Mather, 'Fewer Hmong: market forces at work', *Hobart Mercury*, 3 October, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> S. Downman, *Intra-ethnic conflict and the Hmong in Thailand and Australia*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 2004, p.180.

<sup>37</sup> 'Stateline', Transcript, ABC TV, 5 September, 2003.

Brisbane can be regarded as the second phase of the secondary migration and, whilst there was a strong economic motive, it was what Downman describes as a deliberate decision to tackle the issues of tokenism, cultural complacency and assimilation.<sup>38</sup> Vue and Chue Thaow talked of the decision by Hmong elders to create a larger, more viable community in Brisbane, in an attempt to unite the Hmong and invigorate the desire for Hmongness and the opportunity to preserve it.<sup>39</sup> Downman believes the move to Queensland ‘was conducted as an attempt to link all facets of Hmongness.’<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, however, at no point did any Hmong express this to me. This raises the question as to whether the decision was fully understood by all the Hmong who moved. Another interesting point is that Hmong Christians also moved to Brisbane and they no longer practise parts of the Hmong ritual so are not fully involved in the recreation of the ‘Hmong way’.

The economic rationale proposed for the move was the belief that Brisbane would offer better employment opportunities for young Hmong, cheaper housing and a more affordable cost of living. Vue Thaow commented that it was very sad that the Hmong had been in Tasmania for a long time but Tasmania could not produce enough jobs. He added that, as the first to arrive, he would probably be the last to leave, suggesting that even he may move on eventually.<sup>41</sup> One informant described how he and a group of four friends had what he described as a game plan, before leaving Hobart for Brisbane.<sup>42</sup> It set getting a job as the priority, then buying a house and then sending their children to private schools. In two weeks, one of them obtained work and they have in fact all achieved their aim. He claims that their success influenced other Hobart Hmong and Hmong from elsewhere to join them in Brisbane. Hmong are also moving to Brisbane from Cairns and Innisfail, since the banana industry ceased to offer them the opportunities they anticipated. In addition, some of the younger generation from Far North Queensland are attending university in Brisbane and families are moving to join them. This represents a tertiary migration for these families.

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<sup>38</sup> Downman, ‘Intra-Ethnic Conflict’, p. 199.

<sup>39</sup> E. Whinnett, ‘Hmong pulling up roots’, *Hobart Mercury*, 29 November, 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Downman, ‘Intra-Ethnic Conflict’, p.199.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

In 2005, when I interviewed Hmong in Brisbane, a number commented that they saw less of other Hmong since moving from Hobart. They met fairly infrequently and were unable to drop in on other Hmong due to transport difficulties and distance. The new suburbs of Browns Plains, Heritage Park and Logan County are amongst the places where some of the Hmong have purchased large blocks of land and built homes. One man said that in Brisbane it was hard to develop a feeling of community, in particular with Hmong who had moved from Sydney, and efforts to start an inclusive Hmong association had not had any results thus far. The association name, Hmong Sunshine State Inc., was chosen to focus on the state of Queensland in an effort to unite those who had made the secondary migration from Victoria, New South Wales and Tasmania.<sup>43</sup> The impression I gained was that great efforts were being made to establish connections with Hmong from other Australian cities, including attempts to find a meeting hall which would be accessible from the various locations where the Hmong now live in Brisbane and its suburbs. My informant said that the aim is to 'put all Hmong under one umbrella'.<sup>44</sup>

Certainly the young people had better access to work in Brisbane than in Hobart, where Year 10 school leavers, with poor written English skills and few work skills, had difficulty finding employment. There is more heavy and light industry in Brisbane. However this ability to find unskilled work is to a certain extent due to the passage of time. Young Hmong who left Hobart earlier had only had a few years of education in Australia and had difficulty finding employment in Hobart, whereas those seeking employment since re-locating to Brisbane more recently had undertaken most of their education in Australia. There are still problems of early school leaving in Brisbane, however, which means some young Hmong are leaving with minimal, if any educational qualifications. Di Grech, principal of Bentley Park College, Cairns, says many Hmong fail literacy tests because of illiteracy in their first language and that it is quite common for Hmong boys to stop attending school at thirteen or fourteen. She sees this as 'a cry for help from students who do not understand and cannot cope with the language and the work. They might be able to speak English but they cannot

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<sup>43</sup> Hmong man, M3, interviewed Brisbane, 9 August, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

write it.’<sup>45</sup> Clearly these young people will have difficulties obtaining employment as many did in Tasmania. Several Hobart Hmong interviewed in Cairns, Innisfail and Brisbane actually had children and other relatives living in Hobart, Sydney and Melbourne. The pull factor of immediate family and clan, therefore, has apparently not exerted control over all the Hmong.

Unlike the situation in America, initially the Tasmanian Hmong did not move to Far North Queensland to reconnect with relatives. There was a group of families that could be called the ‘pioneers’. After the first families established themselves, other family members were motivated to follow. The motivation was mainly economic. Nor, in most cases, were their moves made shortly after arrival in Australia. The Tasmanian Hmong were not widely dispersed when they arrived in Tasmania. Although they were distant from other Hmong in Sydney and Melbourne, there was a lot of communication between the different communities and elders came to Hobart for important celebrations such as funerals. In Hobart the Hmong lived predominantly in the northern suburbs within easy reach of each other. I believe the secondary migration of the Hobart Hmong was dictated by practical considerations which suggest a rationalised approach, influenced mainly by the desire to improve their economic situation. I have thus coined the term ‘pragmatic relocation’ to describe the re-diasporisation. I define the concept as including relocation for known, unknown and hoped-for opportunities; reunification with family and friends, partly as a result of clan obligation; a desire to be part of a viable community; and to satisfy a sense of adventure and independence. Their historic migrations earned them the description of the most adventurous of migrants and it seems to me that they still exhibit that sense of adventure.<sup>46</sup> Illustrating this last point, one Hmong man said ‘We were like little birds in Tasmania. We couldn’t fly and we needed the mother bird to feed us. Later we found our wings, learned to fly and became independent.’<sup>47</sup> He added that the support of the CRSS groups who encouraged the families to gain control of their lives was very important, and that the Hmong are grateful for that. With independence came the desire to seek fresh

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Downman, ‘Intra-Ethnic Conflict’, p. 221.

<sup>46</sup> Quincy, *Hmong*, p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 21 August, 2005.

opportunities and the confidence to undertake regional mobility. Clearly diaspora does not end with a final journey but allows for subsequent moves. The Tasmanian Hmong followed the pattern of a preliminary exploratory investigation, as is traditional with the Hmong in Laos, and, like their American Hmong counterparts, left behind furniture in some cases, as they would have done in Laos. Others hired containers shared with other families and transported their belongings north. Some took their belongings in trailers. They stayed with other Hmong en route or camped. However the drive to Queensland also represented a new experience for many of the Hobart Hmong, as most had only driven locally around Hobart until they undertook secondary migration. There were some hair-raising adventures including being stranded in floods and unable to contact relatives, with whom they had arranged to stay before finding their own accommodation.

Hage's push, pull and propel factors applied to the Hmong's secondary migration as to the first. The push for the Hmong to leave for Queensland can be explained by the depressed job market, lack of unskilled labour opportunities in Tasmania and the non-eventuation of the communal farm. The pull is best explained as the lure of profit from the banana industry for the first wave and the hope of economic betterment and additionally of creating a Hmong mega-community for the second phase. In addition, there was the persuasion and clan authority of the Hmong who first went to Queensland. The 'propellant' for the second phase was the determination of Australian Hmong leaders to establish a viable mega-community of Hmong in Brisbane. One informant said that he was the first to leave Tasmania for Brisbane and had agreed to go because he thought Vue Thaow would follow.<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, Vue Thaow, who was the original pull factor bringing the Hmong to Tasmania, chose not to leave, but did not exert any pressure on his community to remain in Tasmania. Although he has remained in Tasmania he does spend a lot of time with Hmong in Queensland as well as visiting relatives in the United States.

The families who returned from Innisfail after leaving the farm owned by their brother, have taken up market gardening again outside Richmond, about

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<sup>48</sup> Hmong man, M7, interviewed Brisbane, 11 August, 2005.

30 kilometres from Hobart. They are back at Salamanca Market each Saturday selling their produce. When interviewing them at their present farm they discussed their reasons for leaving Tasmania. One young man said,

I went to Queensland because I was young and I didn't know much about life. My father didn't like the weather in Tasmania so my brother and my father went to check. The weather in Queensland suited my father and my brother told me things which influenced me. We had a family discussion and checked things. We thought it over again. It was nothing bad about Tasmania that made us move. Just that we thought it might be better in Queensland.<sup>49</sup>

His wife's family was leaving for Innisfail and she wanted to go 'because there was no point in staying in Tasmania without them.'<sup>50</sup> His brother said, 'The vegetation attracted me. I thought I would make a lot of money, very good money!'<sup>51</sup> His wife said 'I wasn't upset about going. I could still contact my parents in Hobart. I left all my family behind. My husband said 'go' so I went. I only worried about the hard work of farming in Queensland. I was working at East Moonah Kindergarten'.<sup>52</sup> Both these young men left jobs as chicken-boners at a Hobart factory so it was not lack of employment that motivated them. When first asked why he left, one brother laughed and said, 'because we wanted to be millionaires!'<sup>53</sup> These responses suggest that economics and family ties were the major motivation for them to leave.

The fact that these two couples and others have returned to Tasmania indicates that the topic of secondary migration cannot be neatly tied up. There were instances of families leaving and returning before the term 'secondary migration' was being used in relation to the Hobart Hmong. One young man headed to Canberra to join an uncle and an offer of work. Another family left for Melbourne and Queensland but later returned. A young woman moved to Melbourne after marriage, but returned to Hobart because of her father's terminal illness. After his death she and her family, including mother, grandmother and two brothers, moved to Brisbane. There are several instances of families who,

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<sup>49</sup> Hmong man, M20, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Hmong woman, F20, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Hmong man, M21, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Hmong woman, F21, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Hmong man, M20, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

having left, returned and departed again. In the last two years four families have decided to return to Tasmania and another is planning to return. On the other hand another family departed at the end of 2007. The two brothers and their families interviewed above returned in 2004, after failing to make a satisfactory living growing bananas in Queensland. Asked for their reasons for returning to Hobart, one brother commented,

There was no choice but to come back. You can't expect others to pay your bills. I was wrong once. I must take the long way, not the short cut! I decided being a millionaire was not important but paying the bills was. We knew we could find land because other families were still here [in Tasmania] and we could live with them until we found something. We nearly left again because we couldn't find a house. Landlords didn't want to let to us.<sup>54</sup>

His wife added 'I miss my family but I'm glad to be back.'<sup>55</sup> His brother said 'I am happy, I made the right decision this time.'<sup>56</sup> The brother's wife said 'We don't have much money but we can pay our bills. I'm happy to be back.'<sup>57</sup> Another relative is talking of returning to Tasmania because his children want to continue their education in Hobart. He will farm if they decide to return.

The Queensland banana industry is now in the hands of one or two major companies and, to a large extent, the smaller growers have been squeezed out of the market or have had to concentrate on less popular varieties of banana with a limited market, mainly among Asian buyers. By 2005, many of the Hobart Hmong who initially were growing bananas had given up and were packing fruit for the large companies. Others continued to grow the bananas favoured by Asian customers and managed to keep going by selling to markets in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. Only one former Hobart Hmong family was still making a living from banana farming in 2005 when the research visit was made. Following the catastrophe of Cyclone Larry in 2006, and the destruction of all the banana farms in the Innisfail and Cairns region, there are now no Tasmanian Hmong making a living from growing bananas. Like other farmers, the Hmong obtained

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<sup>54</sup> Hmong man, M20, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Hmong woman, F20, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Hmong man, M21, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Hmong woman, F21, interviewed Richmond, 17 September, 2007.

infrastructure jobs in the restoration of Far North Queensland after Cyclone Larry.

It should be also noted that a number of Hobart Hmong families have moved from Innisfail to Cairns and from Innisfail and Cairns to Brisbane. Further movement has taken place after the secondary migration. Reasons cited for this included better educational options for the children, better work opportunities for the family, better health care and the wish to be closer to family members. These movements can be described as further examples of pragmatic re-location, and it is worth asking at what point the moves made by the Hmong become part of what is the typical mobility of Australian society. The Hmong recognise that they may well move again. Comments from Hmong who formerly lived in Tasmania indicate that their secondary migration is not necessarily permanent, as has already been shown. One informant said 'Innisfail is not permanent, it's temporary.' Indeed, he and his family subsequently moved to Cairns and are considering another move.<sup>58</sup> Other families said they would follow their children if they moved away to take up apprenticeships or further their study. One young woman said she planned to become a teacher or nurse and her parents said they would move to oversee her study.<sup>59</sup> In this respect the Hmong probably differ from other Australian families who would let their children go elsewhere to study and work, but not follow them.

In early 2006, another family returned to Tasmania after three years in Brisbane. They have bought a farm about 40 kilometres from Hobart and grow vegetables to sell at Salamanca Market. Initially, they left their older children in Brisbane with their grandmother, to finish the school year, and only brought the three younger children back with them. The children are the only Hmong at their school but have settled well and one reported that school was 'great'.<sup>60</sup> Their reason for leaving Tasmania was because they needed to be nearer to a shaman, as the wife was ill and doctors in Hobart were unable to find any cause for her ill health. Although the shaman was in Innisfail, they moved to Brisbane as there

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<sup>58</sup> Hmong man, M2, interviewed Innisfail, 22 August, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Hmong couple, M16 and F16, interviewed Innisfail, 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Personal conversation with Hmong child, 2007.

were family members there who could help them. The family had employment in Tasmania but the wife's health was the major concern. The husband said,

In my mind, I didn't want to go. It's still one country, but I didn't want to go. I was sad to leave Tasmania. I felt reasonable [in Brisbane], but the children were very unhappy. They didn't like the heat. They complained about their lunches going off and there was no fan in the [school] hall.<sup>61</sup>

The husband obtained work but the wife explained, 'We could support the family, but the mortgage was an issue. My health improved with the help of my master [shaman] in Innisfail. A master can show you, but not teach you everything'.<sup>62</sup>

In replying to the question as to why they returned to Tasmania, the husband said, 'I was thinking; like a ball turning around and around. What should be good for us? Around and around and we decided to come back to Tasmania.'<sup>63</sup> He then detailed some of the factors taken into consideration before returning.

The water quality in Brisbane was not good. We couldn't support the children with what they wanted because I just wasn't earning enough. We didn't like the hot weather. Down here the weather is cold but my wife can be all right. We can make better money in Tasmania because my wife could go back to work. People in Tasmania are better than Queensland. The health system is better in Tasmania. The schools are more polite and it's as if they care more here. The children wanted to come back to Tasmania. We came back to have a look first, looking for farming and the children can give us a hand. They have space to play and freedom. Everyone is happy to be back here. We are financially better off here.<sup>64</sup>

Although the family needed the help of relatives in Brisbane, the husband said it did not matter to him that the Hmong community in Tasmania is small. He said, 'It doesn't bother me. We are very busy. If your family is fine, it's O.K. We're still in the same country. The telephone is easy. We can book a ticket and go!'<sup>65</sup>

These tertiary migrations back to a familiar place could well be followed by more. The rationale would seem to be similar to the economic aspect which took

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<sup>61</sup> Hmong man, M22, interviewed Campania, 24 September, 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Hmong woman, F22, interviewed Campania, 24 September, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Hmong man, M22, interviewed Campania, 24 September, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

the Hmong away from Tasmania in the first place: hope of better opportunities. The Hmong remaining in Tasmania have many family members on the Australian mainland, and there is movement between the family members, with people returning to Tasmania to visit relatives. There are three young Hmong who have moved to Hobart, never having lived here previously. One is studying, another has an apprenticeship and the third is farming. When I interviewed one of the Hmong couples who did not move to Queensland, the husband said 'I like to stay here because the weather is good for me. Innisfail is too hot. In hot weather I get headaches, nosebleeds, sore toes and itchy skin.'<sup>66</sup> His wife added,

I don't like windy weather. I get a headache but we decided together to stay. It's a better place for my children to study. When there are too many Hmong children, they get my children to leave home. I worry about my children. Here is better. I tell my children if they don't come home, I don't sleep.<sup>67</sup>

This comment followed a discussion about the Hmong children in Queensland who have 'dropped out' and are behaving in ways considered 'un-Hmong', causing concern to their parents. The husband added 'I didn't feel sad when the other Hmong left because we had decided to stay. In the future I want to retire at sixty and stay here and look after my grandchildren.'<sup>68</sup> In the meantime he and his wife own rental property and grow vegetables for sale at Salamanca Market. The four older children of this family have moved to the mainland, living in Cairns and Sydney where they have employment. The three younger ones are studying in Tasmania, one at university. At the time of the interview the family was looking forward to the visit of one of their sons and his family who were to spend their holidays in Hobart. The fact that these Hmong parents are content with their decision to remain in Tasmania favours the earlier suggestion that the Hmong were and are well-supported in Tasmania.

It is fair to say that the Hmong have done what a number of other refugee communities have done, which is to leave their place of initial refuge when they have the confidence and financial ability to do so. Sometimes their departure is

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<sup>66</sup> Hmong man, M15, interviewed Hobart, 31 July, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Hmong woman, F15, interviewed Hobart, 31 July, 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Hmong man, M15, interviewed Hobart, 31 July, 2007.

because they have discovered relatives elsewhere in Australia, whose whereabouts they did not know when they agreed to come to Tasmania. As my refugee support group has found, many of the families we have assisted have left Hobart to settle on the mainland. The Vietnamese moved away over a period of time, as it was difficult for them find employment in Tasmania as it was for the Hmong. They could access piece-work in Melbourne, where the majority went, and this kind of employment and income was not available in Tasmania. Some Vietnamese families lived in Hobart while their children were growing up and then followed them to the mainland. The current Vietnamese community in Tasmania is about the same size as that of the Hmong.<sup>69</sup> Other refugees have gone to West Australia and Queensland, in one case for employment obtained by a friend, and in others, to join relatives and escape the cold. A number have gone to Melbourne and Sydney to join larger communities of their countrymen. In one case this was specifically to become part of a worshipping community of a denomination not represented in Tasmania.<sup>70</sup>

The Tasmanian Hmong have done what historically the Hmong have always done, which is to move to improve their situation. They have done what Hmong have done in other countries of resettlement, such as the United States, France and French Guiana, moving from their first place of residence to a place where opportunities appear superior and/or clan and family ties pull them. In some cases the move has improved their situation. They have done what other refugee groups have done and decided that there are better opportunities elsewhere. They have done what many Tasmanians do, which is to move to the 'mainland' to improve their employment opportunities or change their lifestyle. However, there are two differences with the Hmong. The first is that the second phase of the secondary migration was orchestrated by Hmong leaders to create a location where they could regroup as a viable ethnic community and encourage a sense of Hmongness to counter the perceived loss of tradition and culture. The second difference is that those who have moved on, the majority, have left behind a remnant population which of itself is not viable in terms of Hmong

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<sup>69</sup> Personal conversation with Vietnamese informant, 2007.

<sup>70</sup> For example, there is no Eastern Orthodox Church in Tasmania.

tradition and culture, which can only be fully lived when a number of different clans are represented and there are elders and shaman to practise the rituals.

## Conclusion

In 1989 when I presented an educational project for my Graduate Diploma in Educational Studies (TESOL) I wrote,

It is hard to say whether the Hmong will remain in Hobart. Job prospects are limited, even for those with English and skills obtained in Laos and Thailand. There is much frustration and disappointment and this is compounded by the failure as yet to realise their dream of a Hmong cooperative farm. Some of the older generation still yearn to return to Laos. For the younger ones, they are determined to put their energies into their new country. If the opportunities do not arise in Tasmania, they may be tempted, indeed forced to move elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Reviewing this comment in 2008, and in light of the secondary migration to Queensland, it seems prophetic.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the Hmong community appeared to be well-settled in Tasmania. Most adults had taken Australian citizenship, many had become well-established as property owners and, in some cases, land-owners; the children were settling in schools which catered well for them; a number of adults were employed; Salamanca Market and other smaller markets, along with contracts from supermarkets and wholesalers, provided a good outlet for their vegetables. The community was well-supported in many ways. It was reasonably cohesive and enjoyed capable leadership from former Colombo Plan student, Vue Thaow, and his wife Chue. It had a housing cooperative which assisted members in need of accommodation and the Hmong Australia Association met regularly, provided assistance and linked them with other Hmong in Australia. Why, then, did this apparently settled refugee community make a secondary migration, far from their initial destination, leaving behind friends and relatives, homes, farms, income, educational opportunities, security and support systems?

In tracing the history of the Hmong it is clear that they have always been a people which has moved, either from necessity when confronting Chinese hordes or because of marginalisation in China. They have demonstrated a sense of adventure in their migrations and have sought better economic opportunities such

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<sup>1</sup> M. Eldridge, 'Intensive Course for Hmong', unpublished Education Project, Grad. Dip. Educational Studies (TESOL), University of Tasmania, 1989.

as moving across the border into Laos to extend their poppy growing capability in Xieng Khouang Province. The disruption of war and fear of retribution by the communists was a major factor in the exodus from Laos to the refugee camps in Thailand, where many thought they would wait out their time until the communists were ousted. However, whilst not denying the fear of retribution from the new communist authorities, Cooper, as noted, has demonstrated that there were strong economic motives to leave Laos after the communist takeover because of flood and drought as well as the damage to farmlands from napalm and other chemicals. This fact is overlooked by many who consider the only motivation to have been the disruption of the Secret War and the aftermath of the communist takeover of Laos.

It is clear that changes to culture and tradition predate the communist takeover, yet clan and family ties remain important to the Hmong and influence relocation in the diaspora. In addition, Thao has pointed out the parallel between traditional migration patterns necessitated by swidden agriculture and the subsequent moving patterns of reunification and betterment migration in the Hmong diaspora in the United States where the economic motive is again evident.

The thesis also asks whether settlement support was adequate for the Hmong who resettled in Tasmania and whether it was matched with a willingness to modify policy and practice of settlement services. One thing which is clear is that it was not lack of assistance with settlement, or subsequently, which led to the secondary migration of the Hmong. This was reflected very clearly in comments from the Hmong themselves. They acknowledged that local support was generous and varied. Organisations modified their procedures and created new policies to deal with the needs of the Hmong, who were a predominantly pre-literate community. In terms of education and health and even employment, there was a growth in Hmong specific services and it became clear, when interviewing those offering settlement support, that they had gone to great lengths to assist the Hmong. Neither was it a lack of involvement with the local Tasmanian community, which was varied and meaningful.

As we have seen, economic factors have played a large role in the relocation of migrant communities of the diaspora and the Tasmanian Hmong in particular.

Hage's 'push, pull and propel' factors influence secondary migration just as they do the initial relocation. For the Tasmanian Hmong, the secondary push can be explained as the limited employment opportunities in Tasmania and the desire to be economically independent. The pull for the first phase of the secondary migration was the possibility of greater economic success from banana growing and the encouragement to join those family and clan who had already made the move to Queensland. The propelling factor for the second phase of the secondary migration was the decision by Australian Hmong leaders to establish a viable, mega-community of Hmong in Brisbane, where consolidation of tradition and culture could counter the effect of loss of the same.

My own conclusions have led me to use the term 'pragmatic relocation' for the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong. This phrase encompasses a number of aspects of the secondary migration. Interviews for this thesis indicate that it was a desire to improve their economic situation which motivated the majority of the Hmong to leave Tasmania, even to one man declaring that he hoped to become a millionaire. A number of Hmong left jobs and property and had to re-establish themselves on arrival in Queensland. Others left education opportunities. Some made it clear that it was not their own choice to move because they were happy in Tasmania and were unsure what the future would hold for them when they moved. Others indicated that the move was a mark of respect for a decision taken by an elder of the family or clan. A desire for better opportunities for their children reflects the lack of employment opportunities for the unskilled in Tasmania but also a shortage of permanent positions and a reliance on casual work. Health reasons were cited and two informants mentioned the Tasmanian weather. The latter suggests that the perception of people in Hobart that the Hmong had left because it was too cold, is too simplistic an explanation. The aim was improved economic prosperity for all who left but, in addition to this, some of those who left for Brisbane at a later stage, had the added motivation to create a larger, viable community where Hmong values, tradition and culture could be lived out. This can be seen as an idealistic aspect of secondary migration.

By using the stories of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, this thesis places on record the settlement story of a little-known ethnic minority

which at a local and national level deserves recognition. From a wider perspective it places those experiences in the context of the theories of migration, diaspora and globalisation and analyses the secondary migration of the Tasmanian Hmong against these theories and the experiences of other migrant communities. In particular, it compares the migration pattern of the Tasmanian Hmong with those of the Hmong historically, traditionally and in diaspora. In addition this study's findings could have implications for demographic predictions for other refugee communities settling in Tasmania and other parts of Australia. It is hoped that it will also be of relevance to service providers and volunteers alike and will inform policy makers; the fact that the Hmong were a largely preliterate community is relevant, for example, to the settlement of some members of the African groups now coming to Australia. Finally, the thesis adds to the body of knowledge of the Hmong in Australia and of studies of refugee communities and the different ethnicities which have made Australia their home.

In terms of further study, it would be of interest to follow the relocated families to their new homes and examine whether the motivating factor of economic improvement has been realised and if so in what ways. This could be part of a comparative study of secondary migration of post-WWII refugees in Australia, and might be extended to examine refugee policy or lack of it. There is also the possibility of examining all migrant groups which have come to Tasmania since European settlement and to look at their onward movements away from the island. The loss of tradition and ritual is of concern to older Hmong and it would be of interest to look at how this is being dealt with in Australia, including how it spawned the mega-community of Hmong in Brisbane, and how it compares with the efforts of Hmong of the diaspora who are dealing with similar issues. One topic which this thesis has addressed only in general terms is the importance of a sense of place for the Hmong, which would also be worthy of further investigation.

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