

Hmong in France: Assimilation and Adaptation

Khou Xiong

Faculty Sponsor: Barbara Rusterholz, Department of Modern Languages

ABSTRACT

The following paper looks at the assimilation and adaptation of the Hmong in France into French culture and society. The author's conclusions are based on formal interviews conducted with Hmong individuals from January 2003 to June 2003 and the author's own observations while she lived there. The author concludes that the Hmong on the whole have assimilated well on the cultural level but remain socially cut off from French society.

Keywords: Hmong, France, assimilation, adaptation

INTRODUCTION

Historical Background

An estimated 15,000 Hmong live in France today as a direct result of the Vietnam War (1961-1975). Vietnam was the first of France's many colonies to rise against the brutal yoke of colonialism, declaring its full independence from France in 1945 (Quincy 76). This bold move, executed by supposed inferior subjects who needed colonial presence to be able to rule with any degree of enlightenment, incited immediate response from the colonizer. Alas, all was to no avail, and with the end of the decisive and humiliating battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French pulled out. The gap they left behind was almost immediately filled by the United States who feared that a rise of communism in Vietnam would produce a domino effect, causing all the countries around it to fall victim as well. The Vietnam War officially took place only in Vietnam, but Laos was engaged secretly. The Viet Cong coveted Laos for its strategic value in war. Nearly all 625 miles of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, central to their operations, was found on Laos soil (Quincy 1-2).

Early on in the war, it became evident that the Ho Chi Minh Trail needed to be destroyed. Because American soldiers were unfamiliar with the mountainous terrain, the obvious recruits were the Hmong, a mountain minority who lived cut off from the lowland Lao, but who had been instrumental in France's opium monopoly in the recently vanished colonial era. By agreeing to help the US, the Hmong signed an exodus fate. In 1975, the US soldiers pulled out of Vietnam. Masses of Hmong fled in the wake of their noisy and forever departing choppers to escape the vengeance of the Lao communist party, which had taken over. An estimated 130,000 flooded into Thailand where they waited to be transported out of danger (Quincy 6).

*France, Terre d'Asile**

It was in this context that France decided to extend the benevolent hand of mercy. According to Father Claude Gilles in his book, *Franche Comté, terre d'accueil*, aside from implorations on the part of the United Nations, France recognized a duty to these peoples, Hmong, Cambodian, Thai-dam, Vietnamese, and Lao, who were once its *sujets* (23).

What is striking about the Southeast Asian immigration into France as compared to the immigration of other groups of peoples in previous eras is the warm, almost enthusiastic manner in which they were received both on the government level and on the civilian level. The installation of immigrants is usually the business of the government or private organizations such as a Catholic church. However, a number of French families took in orphans and families. Whole communities came together to pitch in clothing and other necessities. Although this surely happened with other immigrant groups, the degree to which civilian populations reached out to Asian immigrants relative to other groups was significantly larger. Southeast Asian immigrants also seemed to receive special attention from the government. For example, all refugees passed through the OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Apartheids). The government, however, created an office that dealt specifically with the needs of Southeast Asian refugees (Gilles 22). This fact is surprising given the small number of Southeast Asian

* France, Country of Asylum

refugees compared to refugees from African or East European countries who also flooded France at about the same time.

In light of the fact that France was experiencing a rather severe economic depression following 30 years of relative economic prosperity, what has been termed *les trentes glorieuses* (1945-1975), the positive reaction to Asian immigrant presence is even more surprising. The Hmong arrived at a time when xenophobic sentiments were on the rise, mainly in reaction to the depressed economy whose depression was perceived to be aggravated by the readily available, cheap labor of immigrants, particularly North African immigrants, who had been encouraged to migrate into France to fill the labor gap following WWII death tolls. Although immigrants of earlier periods in French history met with hostility sometimes as violent as what North Africans and the Arab population have been subjected to, the difference is that former groups—the Germans, Portuguese, Italians, Spanish—shared similar physical characteristics and a similar European culture. Any issues of “us” and “them” disappeared over time as intermarriages and/or adaptation, resulting in complete assimilation, occurred. It is worth noting that many Africans and Southeast Asians have been in France for several decades, yet the widespread assumption that fringes on condemnation that they are “inassimilable” hangs over their heads. Their descendants, born on French soil, speaking fluent French, perhaps even assimilating completely French culture, are still termed *les immigrés*[†] (Stovall 5-10).

French Assimilationist Theory

The “problem” of the inassimilability of these recent groups hints at a characteristic of French society that distinguishes it from pluralist countries like Great Britain and Canada. France does not officially recognize the concept of “race” or “ethnicity” (Cognet 1). In accordance with its republican universalist ideals—legacy of the French Revolution (1789-1815)—which sought to eliminate all societal inequalities in French society, it embraces the view that all people are similar. Differences lay only in nuances in language and customs, which, fabricated by history, are “accidental and superficial” (Duffy 198). Inclusion in the French identity is, therefore, not determined by race, culture, or ethnic origins.

France’s refusal to stress particularities has traditionally justified an aggressive assimilationist policy toward its immigrants. The Hmong are no exception. In anticipation of the welcoming of these ex-colonial subjects, France put into place an extensive welcoming network whose principle goal was their immediate integration into French culture and French society (Gilles 22). Integration naturally came easier if the refugees had had prior contact with anything French. Thus, French officials in the refugee camps in Thailand, where the Hmong had fled to escape persecution, were instructed to accept discriminately persons who demonstrated a minimal knowledge of the French language and/or who had served under the French military or civil service in Indochina (Gilles 25). Refugees would also be accepted if they had family already living in France, or if they could prove that they were fleeing persecution.

Upon the refugees’ arrival in France, Red Cross volunteers went to welcome them at the airport and took them to centers of transit. There they spent about 2 weeks getting medical check ups and filling out essential paperwork for their stay in their new home. Then they were transported to *des centres provisoires d’hébergement*, or temporary housing centers, heretofore referred to as CPH’s, where they lived for 6 months (Gilles 27). This 6-month period was ideally the time for them to become integrated into French life. They were introduced to modern wonders like electricity, running water, cook stoves, and the refrigerator. They attended class everyday to learn to read and write French. In the meantime, another organization looked for a permanent home for each family.[‡]

It should be stressed that although Asian immigrants in France have also come under much xenophobic attack, their experience doesn’t begin to parallel the experiences of their Arab and African immigrant counterparts because they benefit from a favorable impression civilians have of them. The stereotype is that they are a submissive, humble, and hardworking people. They are France’s “model minority.”

It has been estimated that 15,000 Hmong currently live in France. The figure should not be taken for fact as the French do not recognize the idea of a minority and so do not keep official demographic records of their minority populations. Records that are made by INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*) erase any trace of “Hmong,” anyway, because “ethnicity” does not officially exist. All Hmong are officially Laotians. Thus, most Hmong refugees carry the official nationality of “*Laotian d’origine Hmong*.”[§]

[†] immigrants

[‡] For further reading on immigration procedures of Southeast Asians, see Claude Gilles, *Franche-Comté, terre d’accueil: Cambodgiens, Laotians, Hmong, Vietnamiens*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000.

[§] Laotian of Hmong Origins

Note that some Hmong names will also be given in Hmong spelling to ensure correct pronunciation of the given English one.

METHOD

Interviews were conducted from January 2003 to June 2003 and lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Topics were: the integration process, the generation gap, and changes in traditional cultural practices over time. Interviews were conducted in Hmong, in English, and in French.

A total of 20 individuals, all over the age of 18, were interviewed. The participants came from all over France. In the north: Caen and Lisieux.; in the Paris region: Grigny, Evry, and Versailles; in the west: Cholet; and in the south: Blomec, Toulouse, and Bordeaux. Other places where no formal interviewing was done, but where the author spent time with Hmong people are Nîmes, Gex, and Golbey.

RESULTS

The Hmong have been effectively dispersed all over France as a result of the efficient network of CPH's. Unlike here in the United States where secondary migrations usually occurred as clans sought to come together, in France, Hmong families usually found that once the CPH found employment for the male head of the family, it was hard to move elsewhere to follow relatives or clan members. Jobs were hard to find, doubly so because they spoke not a word of the language. The cultural consequences are many.

A Loss of Culture

Funerals

The Hmong in France relative to their United States counterpart have been obliged to let go of many cultural practices and traditions because they are few in number. Many Hmong ceremonies necessitate the existence of elders who know the oral traditions. An example is the funeral. A traditional funeral needs a man who can sing the funerary songs and one who can play the *qeej*, a free-reed multiple pipe musical instrument, to accompany the deceased to the other world. The Hmong have found that it is not easy to keep the traditions. Few Hmong men know the oral traditions. Back in Laos, a whole community probably did not have a man who knew them. Blong Ly observes that, "in the south [of France], it's like this—in the north, I'm not sure—but if there are funerals in the south, you see pretty much the same people performing the ceremonies." The concern is that when these few men who know the oral traditions pass away, there will be no one to prepare the dead for the other world. A whole rich tradition is lost.

On the other hand, the scarcity of men who know the traditions have prompted some families to turn to Christianity. As Chong Lue (Txooj Lwm) Vang put it: "The family needed a faith that could be practiced to fall back on." Or it has prompted families to follow no specific faith. Many of the young Hmong couples rely neither on the Hmong traditions nor on Christianity. Chia (Txhiaj) Lyfoung states, "If my children are sick, to the hospital."

Other obstacles, characteristic of urban life, prevent the Hmong from practicing fully their culture. Many Hmong families today live in huge apartment complexes that were built principally for immigrant workers in the 1960's. How does one keep the culture alive in such an environment? Make a racket with the drum beating during the funeral and the neighbors on either side may call the police; have the shaman pound enough on the flooring and the neighbors downstairs could end up with showers of paint ceiling.

Where does one sacrifice the pig for a spirit calling ceremony? Even if the pig is slaughtered at the farm, how does one cart it up 10 stories?

At any Hmong celebration, friends and all the extended family members attend. How can an apartment, already cramped for the immediate family, fit everyone?

These are some of the obstacles that have prompted some Hmong families to give up cultural practices like a traditional funeral and spirit calling ceremonies, and to not even try to transfer them on to the children.

A striking example is a conversation with a young man concerning funerary rites. The discussion was about changes in funerary rites. The young man insisted that nothing had changed, that the Hmong still practiced them the way they did in Laos. When he was asked whether usage of the funeral drums and the *qeej* playing was a problem to the neighbors, he became confused. He had not known that both instruments are essential to the traditional Hmong funeral.

Weddings

Weddings, in contrast to funerals, are still practiced as in the old ways with the young man taking the young woman home. A message is sent to the young woman's parents that she is safely in her new home, a date for the wedding is set, celebrated, and the young couple becomes official adult members of the community. Slight deviations occur, mainly in response to living conditions. Sometimes families celebrate the wedding in a rented banquet hall or ballroom as the house may be too small. Depending on the financial situation of the family, elaborate celebrations may occur where the young bride dresses not only in Hmong clothes, but in Laotian and in the western bridal gown. Sumptuous feasting of roasted pig and oriental and occidental delicacies accompanied by wine, and finished off with fruits and a huge wedding cake for dessert may occur.

The New Year

The New Year celebration, like the funeral, has somewhat adapted to Hmong lifestyles. While the celebration may change from clan to clan, in general, recognition of a new year involves sacrificing a chicken, performing a small spirit calling ceremony, and then putting up a new *xwm kab*, or a new paper altar where the house spirit that guards the home lives. Before that, though, the community must get together and perform a *lwm qaib*, where everyone circles a pole, first one way to get rid of the bad karma—if the word can be employed here—than another to welcome the good karma.

Discounting those who have converted to Christianity, the Hmong in France may celebrate only aspects of the New Year or not at all. Long (Loog) Xiong of Caen says that their family kills a chicken and puts up a new *xwm kab* but does not perform the *lwm qaib*. This is due to the lack of a community that would allow for a *lwm qaib*. Long's family is one of a few in Caen that has not converted to Christianity. They are the only Xions there, and a New Year celebration must be done among clan members. Such is the case with the families of Txhiaj Lyfoung, Nhia Bee Lo, and Laj and Nu Lyfoung's families.

In other parts of France, such as Nîmes, where the Hmong population is substantial, the case may be different. The author did not have a chance to witness the celebration nor to ask an elder there.

Parent Reaction to Cultural (and Language) Loss

Smaller numbers of Hmong families being able to live in a community have had adverse effects on cultural preservation efforts. Inevitably for the youth, ties to the Hmong culture are weak as they find themselves surrounded mostly by non-Hmong friends. Many cannot express themselves very fluently in Hmong although they understand it well enough when spoken to. What is striking is that over half of the youth who agreed to be interviewed felt more comfortable expressing themselves in English than in Hmong, although all of them preferred French as the language of communication.

Interestingly enough, usage of Hmong was shameful for the youth. Four young women in Caen related to the author that no youth speaks Hmong, because if one does, others look at one weird. Speaking Hmong is considered "backwards." Two young men added that Hmong is only for cracking jokes when the French are around.

The parents naturally regret this. Long Xiong laments, "It hurts me the most to see that my children cannot speak Hmong." Chong Lue (Txooj Lwm) expressed regret and disappointment, as did Chia Lyfoung, although Chia adds, "It's a huge loss, yes, but for my children, given the choice between learning English and learning Hmong, I would want that they learn English because this is the language that will help them in their lives."

The threat of the loss of traditions, unlike the loss of language, seems less serious to the parents. They seem to accept that this is the way it has got to be. Long stated later on in the interview, "I understand that the children have got to do this [let go of the Hmong language and culture] to be able to advance in French society." Nhia Lue Vang from Grigny seconded this opinion, stating, "The Hmong in France are inevitably going to lose Hmong traditions and the Hmong language, but it is no big deal. There are still the Hmong in China and those in Laos who preserve and will keep the traditions alive." Both Nhia Bee Lo and Chia Lyfoung agreed with Nhia Lue.

A Gap, an Impossibly Wide Gap

The Hmong youth are undergoing an experience not unlike their Hmong American counterparts. The root of the problem is that both sides have such completely different mentalities. Yia Vang states that "the parents don't understand us. If the girls don't do what they say, they accuse them of wanting to be just like the French.... They say they are bad children who don't listen and obey...." Neng Vang recalls: "My parents wanted me to have a Hmong education. My father was not a very tender person. He was very strict and had high expectations of us [the children]. He wanted to fulfill his expectations, all rapidly done, without failure."

This pressure to conform to parent expectations in direct conflict with the individualism that French society promises has prompted the youth to regard their experiences in a unique light. A young man aptly termed them *la génération sacrifiée*, or the generation that has been sacrificed. He said:

Here, in this new country, it is our parents who become the children and we, the children, who become the parents. These are paths our parents have never walked before. It's like a wilderness. They are blind, lost. So we are abandoned, left to plow our own paths, and in the end, we come out the parents, because it is we who know the language, the culture, the French system in which we exist. We are weighed down with responsibilities then: the responsibility not just for us but for them, too. It is a double edged sword, though: we become the parents in one sense and must remain the children in another. We cannot simply do what we want as adults and as "parents." We are tied to their expectations of us, to the culture. We cannot simply do what we want. We have been sacrificed.

To sacrifice is to give up something in the interest of something else, not necessarily more important, not necessarily by full free will, and most of the time, not necessarily for the betterment of the one who does it. The statement suggests that this individual feels tied down to Hmong culture and tradition and to the community. All the youths echoed unanimously, in one form or another, this feeling of being tied down in chains of culture:

Laj Lyfoung: "The Hmong youth see that their French friends have more freedom because they can have a studio or an apartment at 18 years of age while they [Hmong youth] can't because it's badly viewed to leave and live on your own....They argue with the parents and are called "*laib*."**

Pa Nha: "We shouldn't have to choose between two cultures. No. We should be able to live both, choosing the best [characteristics] of each."

Anonymous source: "I can't marry French because my parents do not like the French....I can't make my own choices without the consent of the family and the clan."

The gap in mentality extends to differences in opinion of interracial dating and marriage. All the youth supported the idea of marriage with French or Arabs often with the support that "you don't choose who you love" (Vang, Lysay). The parents, in contrast, are strongly opposed to the idea of interracial dating. They are occurring more and more, though, as the Hmong integrate more fully into French society. The parents are forced to accept these unions. What can they do?

Culturally Integrated, Socially Cut Off *The Older Generation*

Circumstances have obliged the Hmong to give up aspects of their culture. It doesn't mean that they have integrated into French society. They live in isolation, a part of, yet apart from, French society. According to Chia (Txhiaj) Lyfoung, "the only integration that can be seen is on the work level. The people work with the French in businesses that are French owned and operated. Our youth associations when we were asked by local authorities to go and perform something for the French were not willing because it is not in our mentality to try and mingle with people who do not know us."

For the older people especially, this complete lack of contact with the dominant culture is profound. Numerous factors play in this situation. Principally, there is the language barrier. For anybody to connect with anybody else at all, a common language needs to be there first so that both parties can communicate and find common ground with each other. The older generations cannot speak French. They understand enough to get by and they can utter enough to make themselves understood but they are not able to hold any sort of meaningful conversation. As a result, all of them live in complete isolation from the world outside what is necessary for them: principally the grocery store.

The case with the women is especially profound. Because Hmong families tend to be rather big, it was decided that they would take on the traditional role of homemakers and caretakers and the men would work. All the women I spoke with have worked very little or not at all since they arrived in France. Many never learned to drive. Add

** Literally, *laib* means gangster.

on the fact that many do not live within a substantial Hmong community where they can actually go out and socialize and the isolation is profound.

The Youth

The Hmong youth, although they speak the French language fluently and have western mentalities, remain somewhat cut off from French society. Many of the youths grew up in immigrant neighborhoods. As a result, they made friends with immigrant children and not French children. Nhia Bee Lo states that because “we live in an immigrant neighborhood [], outside of school, my children do not have any contact with the French. Here, their friends are little Arab children.”

Just because they do not necessarily hang out with the French does not mean they have remained Hmong in mentality or in conduct. They disdain aspects of Hmong mentality that they see as oppressing them. For example, consideration for the family when it comes to making choices for oneself or the bride price in marriage or the fact that men eat first before women at important meals. The Hmong youth in France feel torn between two cultures, just as their Hmong-American counterpart does. Their struggle is probably more pronounced though because of the lack of a substantial number of youth who can come together for mutual support.

LIMITATIONS

As with any interviewing, the discomfort is present on both sides. On the interviewee’s behalf, there usually exists a feeling of needing to provide the “right answers.” The fact that he/she is being recorded aggravates his/her level of consciousness. Many of the interviewees felt they had to give short and neat answers. Such feelings naturally influenced their responses to questions.

I would like to stress that this project is still incomplete and not representative across the board. A research of this scope necessarily takes more time than I was able to give it, and I hope that this will only be a first step for me toward the exploration of the Hmong experience in France.

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