

Hmong Traditions: Understanding a Way of Life

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ABSTRACT

From the late 1950s through the early 1970s, the Vietnam War affected nearly the entire Hmong population in Laos. Many people had to depart their homes on a moment's notice leaving everything behind. They hid in the jungles and stayed alive by eating plants, berries, and roots. My parents survived this traumatic experience, eventually making their way into the refugee camps in Thailand, and finally bringing our family to the U.S.A. During my research I interviewed people about the Hmong culture and our traditions. With the information collected, I wrote an autobiography and illustrated pictures to document this significant chronicle. I have a responsibility to search for rich experiences within the Hmong community and share them with students and community members to honor our history.

INTRODUCTION

The Hmong migrated to Southeast Asia in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Prior to their arrival in Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand, the Hmong lived a simple agrarian lifestyle in China. They settled along the Yellow River. Eventually, the Han Chinese came along and both groups lived in peace for two thousand years. However, when fertile land became scarce and both populations grew, conflicts arose. The Han Chinese believed that their culture was superior and that the Hmong were barbarians and too uncivilized to live with. They forced the Hmong to adopt and assimilate into the Chinese culture. The Hmong could not tolerate coercion and prejudice, so they fought back. In the 1700s the last Hmong royal family was executed in Beijing, and the Hmong surrendered. Many Hmong remained in China and followed the Chinese way of life, while others migrated south to retain their autonomy and traditions.

My research examines the lifestyle of the Hmong before the Vietnam War and the aftermath of the war. Specifically, I examined the psychological and emotional changes that occurred in adults who survived this traumatic experience. Throughout the world, the same cycle of human suffering takes place as powerful as if it never happened before. For instance, the Native Americans lost their land and dignity in this nation when the Europeans came over. The Jewish people suffered genocide at the hands of the Nazis. Since the beginning, when the Hmong fled from China, they continue to journey from one place to another in search of freedom and independence.

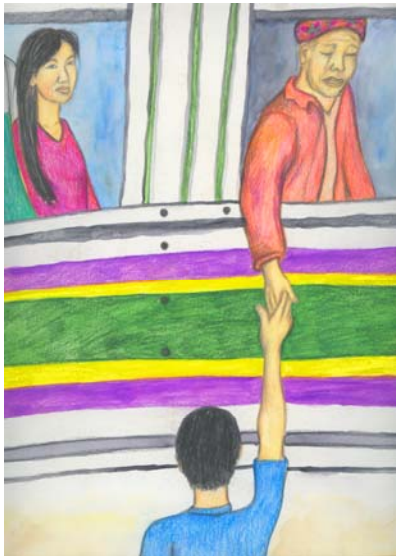
METHOD

I used several methods to gather my research information. In the beginning, I wrote a list of questions to ask my interviewees, but I soon realized that the speakers talked candidly and calmly when I did not interrupt their stories. I also gave them a tape recorder to record their experiences when we could not meet. This method did not work well, because I often needed clarification and more details to understand their narratives. Lastly, the most effective method was to conduct interviews by asking people to share their life experiences with me. I only asked for clarification when I did not understand or need them to explain their thoughts. Storytelling is a vital element in the Hmong culture, especially for the elders who were not educated in the Western style. Oral communication has been a natural process of passing valuable rites and traditions from one generation to another. This method of research was flexible and genuinely honest, which I enjoyed tremendously.

RESULT

The end product was an illustrated autobiography. Each chapter has detailed watercolor paintings to help the reader see and feel what is happening in the story. Art is a powerful instrument that connects and assists readers to understand the complexities in Hmong culture. I also shared my research project with area local middle school students. I hope to inspire them to write and research their own family histories.





CONCLUSION

Life in America has been challenging for many immigrants. The Hmong once lived independently in the mountains of Northern Laos, and endured harsh living conditions during the Vietnam War. They risked their lives to rescue American pilots and also intercepted Communist soldiers who utilized the Ho Chi Minh Trail to deliver supplies from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. Many Hmong men were recruited during the “Secret War” and spent months in the jungles ambushing enemies. Because of their affiliation with the United States, the Hmong were granted immigration status as political refugees in the late 1980s.

In America, numerous Hmong have lost their once strong family ties as new obstacles have emerged. In Laos, a man who was once a proud village mayor now works on an assembly line at a factory. The loss of pride, dignity and essentially freedom has destroyed their self confidence. Some of the adults who once lived in Laos experience pain and constant yearning to return to a familiar landscape. This longing intensifies as they grow older. Many of these refugees spent a decade of their lives in the refugee camps where hard labor was the only means of supporting their families. Another disappointment for elders is their children; some of them have adapted successfully to the American way of life and ignored their parents’ cries to maintain a heritage they risked their lives to preserve. I hope to share the story of their sacrifice with younger generations.

When the elders spoke about their lives in Laos, hope and excitement sparkled in their eyes. I was reminded that without them I would not be in this country. Without their dedication and desire to stay alive, our culture would not have flourished and transformed into what it is today.

FURTHER PLANS

This research experience has inspired me to continue writing and illustrating books about the Hmong people. There are many books that inaccurately portray the Hmong and their experiences. I hope to share my experiences and knowledge of the Hmong with a wide audience so we can understand and appreciate one another.

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