

Introduction

“Will They Eat Me?”

In a small room, the man sits ramrod-straight across a beige Formica desk from a welfare worker, a woman with black hair and pale beige skin. He listens closely as she speaks to him in their common tongue — Hmong. The man leans forward, frowns slightly. “Hanh?” The worker repeats. I have no idea what they are saying. Perched on a metal chair with my knees squeezed against the desk, reporter’s spiral notepad on my lap, I try to fade into the wall.

Once or twice during the meeting, Chamy Thor, the welfare worker and pioneer college graduate, turns to me with a quick English explanation of what’s going on. She appears calm enough — she has a serious face and speaks with an even voice — but her white sweater and pale pink slacks suggest — what? A beginner’s vulnerability? Chamy has already explained to the man that I am writing a story about her for the newspaper. I detect no response to the information.

The man wears spotless white jogging shoes, gray slacks, and a gray T-shirt that says, “Northern California/The 116th/Chevrolet Dealers.” His brown arms are folded, and his black hair stands at attention in a crew cut. They talk about his health.

He is Hmong, one of the mountain tribes from Laos that, recruited and supported by the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency, battled communism in Laos in the 1960s and 1970s.¹

He arrived in the United States three months before this Northern California welfare office visit in 1987, along with his wife and three sons. Before his country fell to the communist Pathet Lao in 1975, he had served

for seven years in the Royal Lao Army, Hmong Division. After Laos fell, he fled with his family into the jungle — just as Chamy did with her family — and carried on a guerrilla battle for eight more years. Finally, in 1983, the family escaped to Thailand and, after four years in refugee camps, came to America.

Now, in an institutional room in Marysville, California, he is sorting out his future with Chamy's help. To qualify for benefits, she tells him, he must go to school, learn English, and attend a job club.

But he is claiming disability, hoping to be exempted from the work requirement. He can barely see with his right eye or hear with his right ear, he says, due to years of firing a rifle. Also, there's no transportation.

Over the manila file on the desk between them, the two discuss where he can find a doctor and when he will report back to her. Then Chamy slides a paper in front of him with short, strong fingers. He takes a pen and slowly prints his name.

On the surface, the scene looked straightforward. Bureaucratic business. I already know about that. It was not their encounters with American government but this people's culture that captivated me, their spectacular dress and unusual customs. But later, as I listened to Chamy while driving with her to meet a Hmong shaman, I began to see that the dynamics between her and her client were tumultuous, far more complex than the usual case worker/client interaction. Though Chamy was nominally in charge of the transaction, it was the man, not the woman, who was armed, by tradition, with power. I began to look more closely at Chamy.

Here in America, Chamy told me in the car, nothing is the way it was. "Everything change," she said, distress giving her voice a fleeting hardness as we drove south on Del Paso Boulevard. Never in their homeland, I understood, did a law say a man had to work or explain why he couldn't. Never was school required. Never from one end of life to the other did a Hmong need to hold a pencil or pen. And never would a normal adult male be subject to the decisions of a woman, especially concerning his livelihood.

I began to see that encounters such as this are awash in cultural chaos. The phone calls Chamy was receiving threatening her life attested to that. The ways of the people were being challenged by revolutionary ideas, and Chamy — with at least part of her heart — was leading one of the charges. Along with her pink-slacks vulnerability, Chamy had spine. That was evident from the way she tossed off the information about the threatening phone calls.

Before I knew it, Chamy had worked her way under my skin — Chamy

first, for her courage, and then every other person portrayed in this book. This is a biased story: I have fallen in love with the Hmong, from the crumpled, warty old men with giant dignity to the perfectly named baby Sunshine. I love them for themselves and because they so innocently opened my mind.

The Hmong are among the latest of the immigrants who over the centuries have walked, sailed, ridden, driven, or flown to America. In 1998 they numbered about a quarter million in the United States. Estimates at the end of the '90s placed more than seventy thousand Hmong in California, more than sixty thousand in Minnesota, forty-five thousand in Wisconsin, ten thousand in North Carolina, six thousand in Michigan, five thousand in Colorado, two to four thousand in Georgia, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and South Carolina, and a thousand down to as few as ten people (Arizona, New Jersey) in twenty-five other states. There are at least seven million Hmong worldwide, roughly equivalent to the population of Massachusetts or Virginia. Most of them are in China, but others have migrated to France, Australia, and Canada.

The Hmong have swamped communities such as Merced, California, and Green Bay, Wisconsin. Tensions in American communities can heat up, as shown by a report written for the United States Commission on Civil Rights with the no-nonsense title *The Hmong in Green Bay: A Clash of Cultures*. Businesses and public agencies try to adjust. Telephone companies, utilities, the courts, and the IRS have initiated interpreter programs in Hmong along with Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

Some observers say the Hmong have been one of the least prepared immigrants for what they found in America. No one has had to leap further to adapt to life here. Since 1975 they have confounded immigration and refugee workers with what even some Hmong call Stone Age ways. In their first days here, they were stumped by Western toilets and electric stoves, standing on the one and building cooking fires on the other. Snow looked like salt. One group of newly arrived Hmong were frightened by the hugs they received from a crowd of sponsors at the airport. They feared, as they were passed from one happy American to the next, that they were being scattered so that one of them could be stolen.

Parents and their children have been baffled by school, and teachers in turn have been baffled by the Hmong. Only a few Hmong experienced classrooms or written language in Laos. Some families resisted sending their daughters to school. And religious beliefs have been known to pop up in unexpected ways. The father of a kindergartener insists his son was spiritually harmed when a classmate poked his finger with blunt-ended scissors.

The Hmong still frustrate physicians and nurses. Though Hmong will use medicine that they can see brings results, centuries of belief tells them that sickness is caused by the flight of souls.

Chamy told me one day at her dining table, where we have so often talked, about her mother's visit to the United States in the early 1990s.

"We went to the airport, and we picked her up. All the people came out [of the airplane], and we see no one came out anymore. We thought, Oh, how come we don't see her? And finally there's an airplane attendant brought her out, and she's very, very tiny! I couldn't believe it, because she's very tiny.

"And then when she saw us she start to cry very, very loud. She was so scared, she cry very loud, and so all the people just look. We draw a pretty good crowd! And then we were crying and crying."

It wasn't the airplane, Chamy said, nor being up in the air that scared her mother. It was the airport elevators. Chamy seemed amused.

"Whenever they took her to the elevator, she didn't know that it is [an] elevator. She thought they going to weigh her, how many pounds she had, and they going to eat her up. Weigh her and find out how many pounds she have. Is it good to eat yet or not? She really think about that. So she was very scared."

Mom's world and the world of elevators are like two circles sketched on paper that neither overlap nor touch. The worlds are as foreign to each other as those of a shaman and a medical doctor, or those of a child who works the field at age eight and a child who works a computer. Sitting in a neat middle-class apartment listening to Pang Foua Yang Rhodes, a Hmong woman graduate student, I drew two circles on my notepad. This is the Hmong world, I told her, and over here, not touching, is the American world.

The sketch struck a chord with Pang Foua. "I like your diagram because I think most people would do this." She grabbed a pencil and drew two overlapping circles next to mine. She poked the air toward my separate circles. In school, she said, "it definitely felt like there were two different worlds that you interacted in. Like on the weekends it was the Hmong world. You ... visited with Hmong families. But on weekdays you were in school. This was a totally different world."

She continued. "We've been transplanted from a culture that didn't really allow room to transcend the cultural boundary. There wasn't a need to, and there was no stimulation to." Their world, high in the mountains, was largely self-contained.

While Chamy's mom, following her sojourn in America, has returned to the secure Hmong world in the hill country in Laos, people like Pang

Foua and Chamy and Chamy's client at the welfare office have stepped — or been thrust — into a middle space. There they attempt the construction of a new mental universe. For them, every thought and every mode of behavior comes into question. They have to think about everything. The mind becomes exhausted and the emotions raw. I could see it in Pang Foua's and others' storytelling, their worries, their anger, their on-the-ground experiments, their dreams and defeats. The man in the welfare office was attempting to patch together a reasonable, dignified future as best he knew how.

There in the middle space that they occupy, the forest is full of tigers. Not everyone finds their way. The terrain is unfamiliar. The old mental maps and tools no longer work. Some get eaten.

My wish in writing this book is to follow a few Hmong — friends, now — from their home world into the middle forest of the tigers. I have divided the book into sections so as to reflect that journey. Following a portrayal of the exodus experienced by the Hmong over thousands of years and by individuals in the last decades, the book turns in Part Two to the world left behind by the Hmong, where the people we see now were molded. Part Three, "America the Difficult," glimpses just how costly that shift has been, and the final section touches on the accommodations people are making in order to create emotional and material shelter for themselves and their families.

The stories of most of the people in the book belong to one or another of these sections, but others span the entire book.

Being an American writing an American book, I have gravitated to the stories of individuals, even while describing a people accustomed to taking their cues not from an inner, individual voice but from family and community. Of the hundreds of Hmong I've met, most do not think of themselves first as individuals. Ask them to describe themselves and most would simply shrug or say something about their parents, grandfather, siblings, clan, or people. One scholar who spends time thinking about such things referred to East Asia — the ancestral home of the Hmong — as a place "where the concept of the person as a separate entity is debatable."² Like grapes, the Hmong come in bunches. You can't encounter the Hmong without seeing their community. Only rarely do I visit a solitary Hmong. In every apartment and home, someone is always coming in the door. The phone is always ringing. They are always sharing information, housing, food, rides, babysitting, marriage problems, a pickup truck. Young people arrive home with their friends — relatives, of course — and old people come to pick something in the garden.

That's the circle labeled "Hmong world." The other circle, Pang Foua

insisted, does not touch it. Compared in a study with fifty-two other countries, the United States topped out as the most individualistic nation on earth, with individualism defined as seeing the self as the basic unit of survival rather than the group.³ It is the lone cowboy or inventor that lights our fires.

Now these Hmong, wedded as they are to communal ways, seem to be undertaking their internal reconstruction projects as individuals. Shelter is scarce in the middle forest. Few parents, grandparents, or older siblings—people who would normally pass on their knowledge—know this terrain either. Rarely anyone to say, This is how to do it. Can they survive as a community as they individually adapt to life in America? It is uncertain.

In telling the story of Chamy, I've chosen others who, together, suggest her context. Of the older ones, she is an heir. For the younger, an outrider. They are for the most part people I met along the way in my search to understand what's inside the heads of the Hmong. Several of them were introduced to me by Chamy. Only the gang member needed to be searched out. A few are outstanding persons, while others are typical Hmong Americans. I ended up loving them all—cranky, loving, misguided, funny, officious, defeatist, bright, troubled, talented, but always loyal.

The book's main figures are these, in the order in which they first appear:

Chamy Thor (“chay-mee tore”), a workaholic in her late forties at the time this was written, lives in Sacramento with her sociable husband, Nom Npis Lis (“naw bee lee”). Their grown children live with them. They are Johnny, married to Patty; Ken, married to Virginia; and May, married to Ku. Chamy's mother, Kia Lis (“kee-a lee”), lives and farms in Laos.

Pang Foua Yang Rhodes (“pahng fooah yang roads”), in her twenties, lives in Southern California with her American husband. She is a graduate student at a theological seminary.

Tou Ger Xiong (“too grr shyong”), an irrepressible comic, lives in Minnesota. He is a frequent presenter at Hmong conferences.

Mai Xiong (“my shyong”), warm-hearted, candid, is in her sixties. She is a retired shaman living in Sacramento.

Cho Lee, an earnest mother in her thirties, lives in Santa Ana with her talkative husband, Long Yang. She and Long are factory workers. Their children, a girl and three boys who are already imprinted with the classic Hmong open-handedness, are Zong, twelve; Lao (“lah-o”), nine; Feng, eight; and Dou (“doo”), seven.

Mai Xia Cha (“my see-a”), bright, passionate, is in her mid-twenties. She lives in San Diego with her husband, Zhen Fang, and their four small children. Mai Xia is a pioneer, looking for her moment.

Ly Vong Lynaolu ("lee vong lee-nah-o-loo"), angry, full of visions, was an officer in the Hmong Secret Army in the Vietnam War and a leader in the Sacramento Hmong community. His widow is the beautiful Pao Chao Lo ("pow chow loh"). Among their nine children are these grown daughters: Nouzong Lynaolu ("noo-zhong lee-nah-o-loo"), an activist; and personable Katie, or Noumoua ("noo-moo-a").

The handsome, charismatic Sai Sue Lor ("sigh su lor"), in his twenties, lives in Sacramento with his wife and baby. He is a former gang member, rescued in a surprising way by his culture.

Dr. Lue Vang ("lew vang"), a jocular educator and Christian in his late forties, lives in Sacramento with his family. He remembers being adopted.

These people and others contribute to the picture of how the Hmong are melding "Hmong" and "American." But the story belongs to Chamy Thor — complex, tireless, disarmingly open in our girl talks yet more often chary of talk, tough or "sweet," as she called herself, according to the situation, and above all courageous in leaving the familiar to scout out a new life as human beings have done since the beginning.

Working out a life in a land of tigers takes a toll. One day, recalling that many elder Hmong suffer depression due to losing family members and homeland, I asked Chamy if she ever felt depressed.

"Yeah, oh, yeah, I have a depression, but not in terms of old life or what I lose back there. What depress me is [that it's] very hard to adjust to a new country, very hard to compete with the people here to make a better life. Yeah, I do have depression. It make me a short temper and can't sleep, have to take sleeping pill." Then she laughed the sweet, lilting laugh of a well-schooled Hmong woman. "Even that, it doesn't help."