

the HMMONG

A struggle in the sun



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A struggle in the sun

Refugees find a new life in Fresno

10,000 newcomers drawn by family ties and farming hopes

By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER
Bee staff writer

First of four parts

His movements hidden by the night, True Vang approached the Mekong River. Across the river was Thailand — and safety.

At any moment, he knew, soldiers from the Communist Pathet Lao might appear and wipe out the 300 Hmong refugees he had led through a nightmare of fear, starvation and death.

Vang lashed together four or five chunks of bamboo into a pathetic but serviceable raft. He thrust the raft in the water, jumped aboard and began paddling.

The others — the remnants of the band of 1,000 soldiers and civilian men, women and children who had begun the flight from Laos weeks before — did the same.

In minutes, they were in Thailand.

They had walked hundreds of miles. They had discarded their few possessions and had left their dead and dying where they fell. They had survived.

Today, Vang lives in Madera.

He is one of the thousands of Hmong (pronounced mong) who have come to the San Joaquin Valley in search of a better life.

They came to the valley from Southern California and from such states as Rhode Island, Minnesota, Colorado and Kansas to rejoin families and clans and to take up farming, their centuries-old way of life.

In so doing, they have made Fresno the largest Hmong center in the United States. One-sixth of all U.S. Hmong — 10,000 people — live in Fresno. Another 7,000 live in Merced County.

And they have become the dominant Southeast Asian refugee group in Fresno, far ahead of the 2,500 lowland Lao, the 2,000 Vietnamese and the 200-300 Cambodians who fled Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War.

But, perhaps more than any other group, the Hmong have faced changes for which they were ill-prepared.

Their foremost problem is that most cannot speak, read or write English. Shopping in a supermarket, running a washing machine, reading street signs and filling out job applications are daily frustrations.

Their attempts to learn English are complicated by a widespread inability to read or write in the Hmong language, which was recorded on paper only about 30 years ago.

"Many of my people don't even know how to hold a pencil or pen," said Vanguoa Cheurong, a teacher trained in Laos and Singapore.

Equally shattering, a farming life is only a memory for most Hmong. Lacking money and an understanding of modern agricultural methods, most of the about 100 Hmong families who farm



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Say Long Vue shows war medals in front of Laotian flag.

in the Fresno area are struggling.

Unable to farm, unable to communicate, about 90 percent of the Hmong in Fresno are unemployed. Most — about 7,000 in September — are on welfare. Many feel isolated from American life.

But their ties with their new and strange home were forged in Laos many years before they ever saw the United States.

In 1961, at the instigation of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Hmong entered the long-running civil war between the Royal Government of Laos and the Pathet-Lao.

Vang was one of the thousands of Hmong who were recruited, trained and supplied by the CIA.

He rose to the rank of colonel in the Laotian army, fought in more battles than he can remember and rescued five American fliers shot down by the North Vietnamese.

Between 15,000 and 20,000 Hmong, soldiers and civilians, were killed in the war.

Thinking about the losses, Vang shakes his head and sighs. Some of the Laotian soldiers who were killed, he said, were less than 15 years old. They had been drafted as soon as they were big enough to carry guns.

But neither war nor migration is new to the Hmong, one of the most ancient peoples in Asia.

Ethnically Chinese, the Hmong cultivated the plains of the Blue River and the Yellow River near what is now Shanghai in eastern China 2,000 years ago.

Dr. Shien-Min Jen, a Fresno State University professor of anthropology, said the Han Chinese pushed the Hmong into southwest China between 600 and 800 A.D.

The Han called the Hmong

"Miao," which later became "Meo," or barbarian. But the Hmong have always called themselves Hmong, or "free men."

Between 1810 and 1820, the Han pushed the Hmong into French Indochina and then into the highlands of northern Laos.

In 1893, France made Laos a protectorate, and did not relinquish control until 1949. Laotian kings were allowed to retain some power, but the French ruled the capital of Vientiane.

The French rule had little effect on the Hmong, who were farming and living simply in the remote highlands near the Plain of Jars.

Say Long Vue, a Fresno resident who is somewhere in his 50s — he doesn't know exactly — remembers the highlands then as very peaceful.

"People farmed and worked," he

said. "The Hmong cleared the forest to grow crops."

But that serene life ended when the Japanese invaded Laos in 1941 and drove the French survivors into the highlands. The traditionally hospitable Hmong welcomed them and hid them in caves until the Japanese were ousted in 1945.

Vue was one of the Hmong soldiers who aided the French in 1945. He won a medal for bravery, which he proudly displays today.

When the French left Laos, the civil war erupted.

The Hmong entered the war 11 years later when Gen. Vang Pao, who was the highest ranking Hmong in the Laotian army and was working with the CIA, appealed to his people to fight for their security and independence.

The Hmong formed an army of 30,000, which became the backbone of the CIA's anti-communist efforts in Laos.

Vue again was on the front lines. In 1964, he earned another medal for bravery.

While most of the Hmong fought on the ground, about 30 became fighter or bomber pilots and provided air support for the army. One of the pilots was Capt. Vang Sue, brother of Fresno Hmong leader Tony Vang.

In 1972, Sue, 27, was shot down and killed. He had flown more than 3,000 missions in four years and had been shot down three times before. Of the 12 Hmong pilots in Sue's unit, only one survived.

When the United States pulled out of Vietnam in April 1975, Pao, considered the No. 1 enemy of the Pathet Lao, fled with his top aides to Thailand. Their flight triggered the Hmong exodus.

"I had to leave," said Chong Yang Thao, who was trained as a radio operator by the CIA at the age of 16. "If they [the communists] knew who the radio operators were, they would use a knife, cut the hands and put salt in, then cut the legs."

Teng Vang began his year-long journey out of Laos in May 1975. He walked for 14 days from the interior to Vientiane, the capital near Thailand.

"We carried the babies, food, blankets," he said. "The communists were watching the road — the Phou Pha Highway — and we could not get through. Many people were killed, including some of my relatives."

He lived in Vientiane about a year before he entered Thailand.

For Say Long Vue, the journey from Laos to Thailand took only 15 days. But during the trip he often wondered if he and the others would live.

"We were very tired, ate leaves and whatever else we could," he said, shaking his head. "I felt we



Bia Xiong and her year-old son, Don, share an intimate moment at the Episcopal Asian Center in Fresno.



Fresno Bee
Chong Yang Thao — CIA-trained



Fresno Bee
Vangkoua Chourtung — Teacher

were almost dead."

But some Hmong decided to stay and fight.

"We were hiding in caves and the jungle, and fought communists for three years whenever we had the chance," said Song Ying Moua, a policeman who commanded 190 guerrillas.

When Moua decided to stop fighting, he led about 4,000 people on a months-long trek out of Laos.

Eventually, more than one-fourth of the Hmong in Laos — 100,000 people — fled to Thailand. Another 40,000 died trying.

But the suffering of the survivors didn't diminish in Thailand. They were placed in four prison-like refugee camps in which limited medical care, bad water and sanitation and scarce food were the norm.

According to the 1980 U.S. Comptroller General's Report to the Congress on Indochinese refugees, the camps were chronically short of blankets, mosquito nets, cooking equipment and kerosene for stoves and lanterns.

Vue, who had been used to an active life in the military, recalled that boredom was the rule.

"We just wait there and look at the sky, do nothing," he said.

Many of the Hmong now in Fresno were interned in Ban Vinai, the largest of the four camps.

Dr. Marty Martin, a Fresno pediatrician, worked in Ban Vinai from August 1982 to January 1983 as a volunteer for World Vision, a Christian relief agency affiliated with the United Nations.

"The camp was very congested," he said. "Most of the camp was thatched roof and bamboo wall

"It's not easy to be a refugee. When you have no country, nobody loves you."

Vangkoua Chourtung

buildings. There was no running water or electricity. They pumped water into a tank and people had to carry it."

About 30,000 refugees were in Ban Vinai when he was there, Martin said, but as many as 40,000 had been in the camp at one time.

Half of Martin's patients were less than 5 years old. They suffered from pneumonia, ear infections, gastro-intestinal ailments, tetanus, malaria and meningitis, he said.

While the Hmong endured several years of illness and tedium in the camps, Thai and U.S. officials

fought a diplomatic battle over their resettlement.

"It's not easy to be a refugee," Chourtung said. "When you have no country, nobody loves you."

Initially, the United States refused to admit the Hmong because, officials claimed, they were not U.S. employees, a condition of refugee status.

But Thai pressure eventually wore down the U.S. objections. About 51,000 Hmong have come into the United States, most of them since 1979.

"When they came to the United States, everything had to start at the bottom for them," Chourtung said.

For most Hmong, that meant welfare.

"Refugees are competing against the highest-skill, highest-education level of workers ever," said Robert Whittaker of the Fresno County Department of Social Services.

His department is taking on more than 200 new refugee cases — about 1,000 people — each month. At that rate, 19,000 refugees — Hmong.

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Merced County grapples with Hmong influx

MERCED — While Fresno is probably the most popular destination for Hmong refugees in the United States, nearby Merced County is a close second.

Nearly 7,000 Hmong have moved to the county from the cities where they initially were placed after arriving from refugee camps in Thailand. The population is increasing by about 150 each month.

One of every 21 county residents is a Hmong, said Fred Wack, a county supervisor.

At a hearing last spring, State Sen. Kenneth L. Maddy, R-Fresno, said that Merced County "probably has a greater per capita problem than any other county in the state."

The federal Office of Refugee Resettlement estimates that about 28,000 Hmong refugees live in

California. But a Hmong self-help organization says that the figure is more likely 30,000-35,000.

Fresno and Merced counties are followed by San Joaquin County, with 4,000-5,000 Hmong, and Orange County and San Diego County, each with 3,000-4,000.

The impact of the refugees has been hard on Merced County, which already is suffering a high unemployment rate and low per capita income, Wack told the Legislature's Joint Committee on Refugee Resettlement and Immigration.

Earlier this year, the county unemployment rate was about 20 percent and since has dropped to about 14 percent because of seasonal agricultural work.

Housing is in critically short supply, county officials say, and

funding to provide adequate health care for refugees is too low.

Since 1981, the city of Merced's schools have gained more than 1,000 students, primarily Hmong and other Southeast Asians, said Bill DeSimone, assistant superintendent of the Merced City School District.

To counter the overcrowding, the district is seeking state approval to build two elementary schools and a 14-classroom addition to the junior high.

"All our facilities are being strained," said DeSimone, citing classrooms, transportation, maintenance and the cafeteria.

Officials of the district had expected to put students on double sessions next January. But recent state legislation penalizes schools for that, said DeSimone, so the

district will continue as is, with nearly every classroom filled.

To try to deal with the problems and needs of refugees, the Merced County Board of Supervisors has named a refugee services coordinator and a 27-member Refugee Services Advisory Committee.

Using a \$1 million federal grant, the county is offering job training, job development and counseling. The county also has hired an economic development specialist who is seeking new industry that could provide jobs for the refugees.

The 18-month program also will try to provide the refugees with health care, transportation and housing, and teach them English, financial responsibility, nutrition and family planning.

— By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER



A struggle in the sun

Some myths, facts about the Hmong

Like most first-generation immigrants, the Hmong must contend with the misunderstandings that arise from a lack of knowledge about the newcomers.

These are some of the more common myths about the Hmong, and the facts:

MYTH: Refugees come to the United States to improve their standard of living through the U.S. economic and welfare systems.

FACT: Refugees flee their countries to escape persecution or death. They escape at great risk to themselves and their families. A large number (some estimate up to 50 percent) of the Indochinese who tried to escape lost their lives.

MYTH: Refugees receive up to \$5,000 from the United States upon admission to the country.

FACT: The refugee receives only limited funds from resettlement agencies to cover basic needs. Often the money goes to landlords or to the refugee as vouchers for food and clothing. Most arrive with a large debt, having agreed to repay transportation costs to the volunteer agency — \$470 for adults, \$240 for children and \$48 for infants.

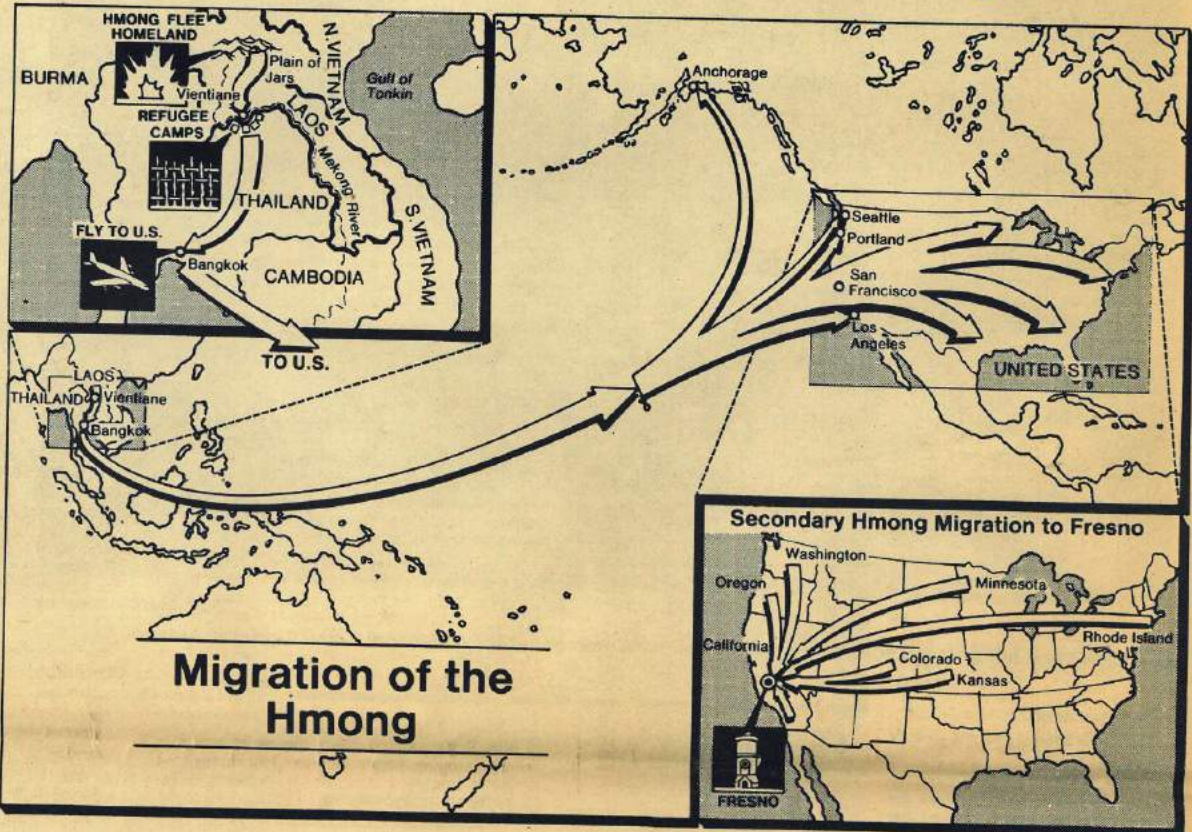
MYTH: Refugees bring many communicable diseases into the United States.

FACT: All Indochinese refugees are screened in Southeast Asia for communicable diseases before entering the United States.

MYTH: Refugees receive special low-interest loans from the government to assist them in buying homes or starting businesses.

FACT: No government loans are targeted for refugees. They must meet the same criteria to qualify for conventional or FHA loans as the general population and pay the same interest rate.

MYTH: Refugees are entitled to



Fresno Bee graphic/Doug Hansen

The Hmong's journey to Fresno involved three countries and false starts in other U.S. cities.

welfare and receive higher aid payments than other cash recipients.

FACT: Refugees do not have a special entitlement to welfare. They receive cash assistance or Aid to

Families with Dependent Children on the basis of need at the same payment level as non-refugee recipients.

MYTH: The state tries to bring more refugees into California to

receive more federal money.

FACT: California plays no direct role in bringing refugees into the state. The U.S. Department of State contracts with volunteer agencies to receive, place and resettle the

refugees. After being initially settled, the refugees are free to move wherever they like.

— By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER

Refugees

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lowland Lao, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Cuban-Haitians — will be on welfare rolls by June 1984, the end of the fiscal year.

In that fiscal year, Whittaker said, Fresno County expects to pay out about \$20 million in cash and benefits to all refugees. Most of the money comes from federal and state sources, he said.

While the highly effective Hmong grapevine has put the word out that the welfare system in California is more generous than those in other states, Hmong leaders insist they don't want to see future generations become dependent on welfare.

"If they stay on welfare too long, they won't want to work," said Chong Yang Thao, the secretary of a Hmong self-help organization.

"Back in Laos, everyone worked on the farm and in jobs and we could support ourselves," said Youa True Vang, the former Laotian army colonel. "Here there is no land



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Tony Vang, foreground, president of the Hmong self-help organization in Fresno called Lao Family Community, meets with the advisory board.

to farm and we don't know how to get it. So we still need aid from the government."

Many Hmong quickly learn, as did Thao, that welfare is their most reliable source of income.

Earlier this year, Thao, whose family had been on welfare since 1979, got the chance to farm two acres.

But he discovered that if he worked more than 100 hours a month, his family would lose their welfare money. Yet his labor would not produce any income until the fall harvest, which was months away.

"My six children were waiting for food," he said simply.

He quit the land.



Marty Martin

Hmong gather at World Vision hospital in Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand.

Shamans, spirits and symbolism — the rich culture of the Hmong

By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER
Bee staff writer

The 30 members of Pao Yang's family gather in a west Fresno home for one of the most important events in his infant daughter's life — the naming ceremony.

Tong Seng Yang, Pao Yang's uncle, presides. He lights a candle and quickly runs six-inch pieces of string through the flame.

The patriarch prays that Eva will be blessed and will grow up to be a good person. Then Yang ties string on Eva's wrist and on the wrists of her parents, brothers and sister to bring the baby luck. The 30 family members do the same.

After all the strings are tied, the trailing ends are cut and put in a glass of water. The contents of the glass are thrown out the back door, carrying all bad luck with them.

In a downtown Fresno funeral home, a different gathering is taking place. A Hmong family is mourning the death of its 11-year-old daughter — the victim of a traffic accident.

A family elder beseeches the spirits to allow the girl to pass through the doors of each place she has lived. As he names each door, other elders burn rice paper — symbolic money for the spirits — and ask that the girl be allowed to continue her journey through each. The last door opens on heaven.

Blia Vang swayed from the waist up in a trance, tapping finger bells on her thighs and chanting nonstop as a helper beat a metal drum. Wearing a squarish ceremonial cap, she



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Blia Vang is a shaman — a spirit doctor and medicine healer — who helps Hmong in need.

performed the ritual while sitting in front of the altar upon which she had lit incense and a candle.

The Hmong shaman — a spirit healer and medicine woman — was chasing away the bad

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Marty Martin

Hmong queue up in food line at Thai refugee camp.

Hmong rely on welfare for survival

200 refugee families a month swell cash assistance rolls in Fresno County

Without the money and technological skills for farming or language skills for jobs, Hmong refugees in Fresno have turned to welfare to support themselves and their families.

Hmong leaders don't like the idea. But until their people are Americanized, they say, the Hmong have no choice.

The growing number of refugees in Fresno County has placed an increased welfare burden on county residents, and that burden is growing significantly each month.

Robert Whittaker of the county Department of Social Services said that at the end of September, about 7,000 Hmong were receiving aid. In addition, 3,500 other refugees also were on welfare.

His department is taking on more than 200 new refugee cases — or about 1,000 people — each month.

In 1983-84, Whittaker said, Fresno County expects to pay out about \$20 million in cash and

“The 100-hour rule also is particularly bad in a farming situation. The fact that he has no money coming in while waiting for the crop doesn't matter.”

Robert Whittaker

benefits to all refugees. Most of that is federal and state funds that the county administers, he said.

The biggest expense will be \$11.6 million in cash assistance for refugees who have been here for three or more years, but cannot support themselves. Of that, 50 percent is paid by the federal government, 45 percent by the state and 5 percent, or \$600,000, by county taxpayers.

The federal government will spend another \$4 million in cash assistance for recently arrived refugees and \$2.7 million in food stamps. About \$1.5 million in Medi-

Cal benefits will be split on a 90 percent-10 percent basis by the federal and state governments.

County taxpayers also will spend about \$255,700 in administrative costs for refugee programs, Whittaker said.

The monthly cash assistance for a family of seven (the average size for Hmong, according to county records) in which the primary wage-earner is not working is \$752.

The maximum amount is \$1,014 for a family with 10 or more children.

Whittaker agrees that the

Hmong want to work, but must depend on welfare.

Tony Vang, a Hmong leader in Fresno, maintains that refugees should not be part of the welfare system, and that other arrangements should be made.

Whittaker and the county agree with Vang, and are arguing with the federal government for a change.

The heart of the problem, Whittaker said, is the “100-hour rule.”

The rule states that if a family's primary wage-earner works 100 or more hours a month, the family does not qualify for welfare or Medi-Cal. The regulations don't specify the amount of earnings.

Whittaker and the county want to conduct a special pilot project in the Aid to Family with Dependent Children-Unemployed program, 70 percent of whose clients are Hmong.

The project would supplement

the incomes of people who work but don't make enough money to support their families. Because of the supplemental income, welfare recipients would be required to take jobs paying less than their benefits.

“The 100-hour rule also is particularly bad in a farming situation,” Whittaker said. “The fact that he [a farmer] has no money coming in while waiting for the crop doesn't matter.”

Chong Yang Thao, a Hmong who gave up farming rather than lose his welfare, said that's exactly what happened to him.

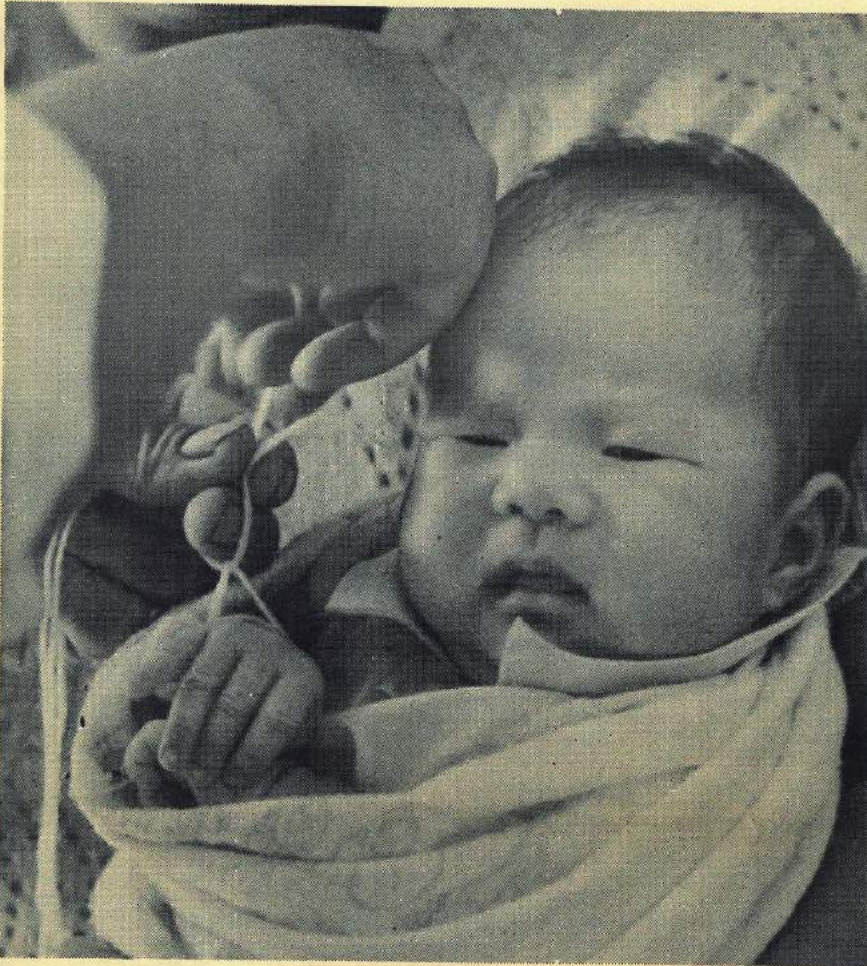
He said he is frustrated and perplexed by a system that he thinks encourages people not to work.

“We don't want the government to have everything for us,” he said. “If [our earnings] are not enough, the government could help.”

— By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER



A struggle in the sun



A string for good luck is tied on the wrist of Eva Yang of Fresno during naming ceremony.

“Back in Laos, we didn't have hospitals nearby so we had to use shamans.”

Vangkoua Cheurtong



Male relatives of Kia Lee and Ber Xiong discuss wedding agreement.



Brandy seals the marriage.

Culture

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spirits that had kept a Fresno woman from having a baby for four years.

The ritual finished, the shaman gave the woman an herb for use in a potion.

Within several months, the woman became pregnant.

As the mediators between the human and spiritual realms of the Hmong culture, Vang and other shamans, men and women, provide cures, exorcisms and prophecies.

In Fresno, even Westernized Hmong consult a shaman when they are sick. Some, perhaps seeking the best of the old and new worlds, look to modern medicine, too.

The dependence on the shaman is one of the fundamental practices of the Hmong, a rustic people from the mountains of Laos who came to the United States when the Communist Pathet Lao overran their country in 1975. More than 10,000 Hmong live in Fresno, the largest Hmong population center in the United States.

Sometimes Vang foregoes the ceremony and just provides potions. One herb, cut into pieces and boiled in water for a few minutes, may cool a fever; another, a stomachache.

“Back in Laos,” said her son, Vangkoua Cheurtong, “we didn't have hospitals nearby so we had to use shamans.”

Fa Neng Lee, a shaman from Ohio visiting his son in Fresno, said that a shaman is gifted, not trained.

“Some people just have the spirit,” he said. “It just came into their heart.”

The Hmong traditionally believe that good and evil spirits influence their lives.

Even Hmong who have become Christians may retain religious customs that focus on gods and household spirits, malicious spirits and spirits of the dead.

The Hmong believe each person has 32 spirits that must stay within the body for good health. But the spirits like to wander off, only to be recalled by the shaman.

Rich in tradition, ceremony and respect for elders and ancestors, the Hmong culture is dominated by strong ties of kinship and dependence on families and clans.

This clannishness is one of the reasons why Fresno's Hmong population has swelled in the last three years. Many Hmong refugees who had been placed in other cities by resettlement agencies came to Fresno to rejoin their families and clans.

An exception is Say Long Vue, who came to Fresno in January 1982. He misses his grown children. Two sons live in France, one in Thailand. His daughter lives in Chicago.

“I worry about them and miss them,” he said. “Even today I cry all the time because my children are away from me.”

In Laos, the Hmong depend on clan elders for leadership, and the practice, to some extent, has been brought to this country.

The Lao Family Community Inc. provides that leadership. It has branches in all major Hmong population centers, including Fresno.

Chong Yang Thao, secretary of the Fresno branch, said he often is asked to provide English translations or other services for Hmong.

“Our people call for help and sometimes it is 12 at night before I get home,” he said.

In addition, young Hmong leaders who speak English represent the organization in the community.

Another practice the Hmong have kept alive in their new home is the large family.

In Laos, the Hmong traditionally had many children — seven, eight or nine weren't uncommon — to help with farming and provide for parents in their old age.

Now, few Hmong are farming and the elderly have Social Security. But most Hmong still want large families.

Thao, 30, has six children. His wife is expecting another.

“In Laos, my family is too small,” he said. “Our people say if we have no children, we have no life. Children take care of parents.”

Vang May Tong said that Hmong want many families and friends exchange visits, give thanks for the year past and voice hope for the new year.

During the holiday, the Hmong also wear traditional garments that feature pa dao, the exquisite Hmong stitchery.

Three main techniques are used in pa dao — embroidery, applique and reverse applique. The tiny cross stitches in the center of a pa dao can total 400 per square inch and may take as long as two hours to complete.

“Some people just have the spirit. It just came into their heart.”

Fa Neng Lee

Fresno Bee photos by Carl Crawford



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Chuaha Vue wears pa dao cap.

For centuries, Hmong women have passed on the time-consuming, painstaking craft from generation to generation.

But many older Hmong who live in Fresno fear that their generation may be the last to celebrate such traditions as pa dao. They worry that their children will forsake the Hmong traditions as they become Americanized.

"We don't mind that they're changing, but we want them to retain the old ways, too," one said. children to keep their family name alive.

"Two children is too small. Six is best," said Tong, who has six children.

But Kha Yang, the mother of four children, said that Hmong women feel that bearing children is their lot in life.

"They don't want babies, but they just have them," she said.

Yang also said some women don't use birth control pills because they believe babies born after discontinuing their use will be deformed.

Hmong culture prefers sons, since they are bound by custom to care for parents in their old

age and provide funeral services for them.

Vang said boys "do better than girls. Girls cannot help their parents, can't do as much work. Girls will marry and leave their parents."

Marriage age traditionally is very young. In Laos, the normal age for girls is between 14 and 16; for boys, between 15 and 20. In Fresno, early marriages are still the rule.

Marriage within a clan — 23 are in Laos — is forbidden. A couple from the same clan, even if separated by thousands of miles, cannot marry because they are considered brother and sister.

The wedding, which usually is held in a home, is a major celebration. Relatives travel from distant cities to attend the event, which is far less elaborate and formal than an American wedding.

The wedding of Kia Lee and Ber Xiong of Fresno was no exception.

Two elders from each clan discussed the intentions and implications of joining the clans. When agreement had been reached, a written marriage contract was drawn up. The four men pronounced the marriage done and drank brandy

to seal the pact. Then the men from both clans toasted the bride and groom with wine and talked about the marriage agreement. A meal followed.

The women stayed in another room and ate apart from the men. They did not participate in the negotiations.

Sometimes the agreement includes a "bride price," which the groom pays to the bride's family to prove his love.

In Laos, the Hmong are polygamous. Custom requires the younger brother of a man who dies to marry his widow and raise the children along with his own.

The Hmong traditionally celebrate only one holiday — New Year's, which begins on the first day of the new moon in December.

More than 3,000 people attended the Hmong New Year's celebration last December at the Fresno Convention Center. They heard speeches in English and Hmong, danced to traditional music and listened to rock music.

In Laos, the celebration lasts seven to 10 days.

Valley farm realities sour hopes of Hmong

By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER
Bee staff writer

Third of four parts

In the two-acre plot north of Herndon Avenue, cherry tomatoes — neatly staked and tied — compete with weeds as tall as a man.

In a nearby field, small, sunburned bell peppers cling to sickly plants.

The two plots are farmed by Hmong. Like most Hmong farmers in the Fresno area, they are struggling because they don't understand that farming in the San Joaquin Valley requires herbicides, fertilizers and technology.

Most of the 10,000 Hmong who have come to Fresno want to farm,

and continue the centuries-old way of life they knew in Laos and in China.

But once here, they are sorely disappointed.

Standing under a makeshift shed at the edge of her two-acre field, Xay Lee Yang said her first-year efforts in Fresno were frustrating.

"This year, the cherry tomatoes didn't make too much money," she said. "I think next year I will grow something else."

Yang left her husband, who is working in a machine shop, and two children in Nebraska to try farming in Fresno with her grandparents. If she is successful, the family will join her.

Yang, like most Hmong, is not

equipped to farm on the scale required for success in the valley, said Sam Bliatout, a Hmong who studied agriculture at the University of Hawaii.

"Very few are making a profit," he said.

"Back in my country they farmed only to be self-sufficient," Bliatout added. "They don't understand here how much you have to control the quality, how to use chemicals and machinery."

Bliatout and others estimate that only 100 Hmong families are farming a total of about 500 acres. Hundreds of others work in the fields as laborers.

Hmong who are unable to farm turn to non-agricultural jobs or to

welfare. A half-dozen families run markets specializing in Oriental foods and products.

In Laos, the Hmong economy was based on crops and livestock.

Most Hmong used the "slash and burn" agricultural method — clearing the forest and setting the land on fire.

The soil, fertilized by the ashes, grew such crops as rice, corn and other vegetables. Then the land was abandoned for a period of regeneration.

The Hmong also raised opium
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“Back in my country they farmed only to be self-sufficient. They don't understand here how much you have to control the quality, how to use chemicals and machinery.”

Sam Bliatout

She offers cures, exorcisms, prophecies



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Hmong shaman Bliia Vang does pa dao needlework at her son's convenience store while waiting for Hmong who want her cures, exorcisms or prophecies. At her Fresno home, she has special herbs to fight illnesses and an altar, below, covered with thin rice paper and a candle, seeds, incense and flowers.



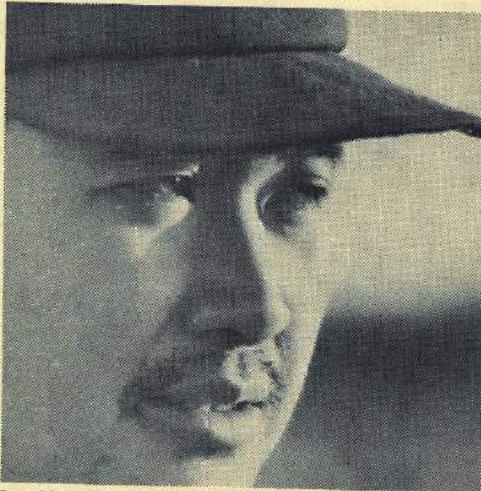
Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Hmong farmer Vang Seng harvests green beans from his one-acre plot.

A struggle in the sun



Tou Mao Her — a Hmong success story.

add a dozen or more producers and acreage, we can't sell it all."

Another problem is that the Hmong are fond of raising specialty crops such as sugar peas, cherry tomatoes, squash, eggplant, cucumbers, Chinese beans, bitter melon and Chinese cabbage.

"The market is not growing fast [for such crops] and it might not give them an income," he said.

About 50 percent of the 1982 sugar pea crop rotted in the field because the Hmong had no marketing outlet, said Anne Haddix, agricultural coordinator for the Fresno Adult School's Adult Refugee Services.

Tou Mao Her is one Hmong farmer who has found success in his 2½ years in Fresno. The first Hmong to grow strawberries, Her leases 12 acres just north of Herndon Avenue and sells his crop to Wawona Orchards.

Her's well-tended field contrasts sharply with those of struggling Hmong farmers. He fumigates the soil, uses drip irrigation and operates a shiny new Kubota tractor.

Her and his wife do most of the work, except at harvest time when they hire help. He hopes that someday he will own his own land and grow a permanent crop.

George Winslow, Wawona's field representative, said he expects the company to gradually buy crops from more Hmong farmers. Now, about two dozen sell their crops to Wawona.

"They're tough, independent people," he said. "Within a couple of years, they will be doing well."

Bliatout said that Her and other successful farmers serve as role models for the Hmong. But, he added, the Hmong also see that most Hmong farmers are struggling.

"I'm afraid if we don't help them with proper farming in the next year, you won't see many people staying in farming."

The United Lao Agricultural Association was formed in late 1982 as a mutual assistance organization for Hmong and other Laotian farmers, Bliatout said.

The association has applied for grants to hire a technical assistant who would work with the farmers.

The Adult Refugee Services program provides the Hmong and other refugees with help on agricultural employment, agricultural training and liaison work linking the Hmong with the agricultural and agribusiness communities.

Abraham Saghdejian, managing partner in VMA Farms of Fresno, said the company liked the work of the 300 Hmong who were hired to pick grapes.

"They're hard workers and honest," he said. "They filled their trays very well and stayed late — till 6 or 7 o'clock."

Although Saghdejian said the Hmong worked without friction with 20-25 Hispanics, tensions between the two groups have been reported at other farms.

Some Hispanic farm workers apparently feel threatened by the Hmong. But no violence has been reported.

The United Farm Workers union

has cordial relations with Hmong and other Southeast Asian workers, said David Villarino, a UFW spokesman.

Villarino said that in Stockton, some growers have tried to use refugees as strike-breakers. But when the refugees were approached by the UFW, he said, they joined the strike and later the union.

Some American farmers are developing ill feelings for Hmong farmers, Ilic said, because they mistakenly believe that the government is subsidizing the Hmong farms.

Small American growers who lease their land blame higher leasing costs on the Hmong, Ilic said.

All but two or three Hmong farmers rent their land, he said, and the demand for lease land has driven up the price, in some cases doubling it.

Joe Santillano, who leases 90 acres just south of Fresno, was told by the landowner that the \$175 per acre he now pays will rise to \$250 when his lease expires because Hmong have offered her that amount.

But Santillano, president of a Mexican-American farmers association, said he is not resentful because the Hmong really aren't much of a threat.

"They're more like a thorn in the side," he said.

One Hmong who has chosen to run a business rather than a farm is Ge Moua, owner of Long Cheng Market at 4440 E. Kings Canyon Ave. Pheng Moua, his "nephew" (not by blood but by clan), helped him start the

market, probably the first Hmong-owned business in Fresno, two years ago.

"It was very difficult to get started," said Pheng Moua. "We didn't know where to start."

The market offers many foods that Hmong use — bamboo shoots, fish sauce, noodles, dried chili, sweet rice, rambutan (a canned fruit), rice paper, chili in fish sauce and bean thread.

The store also stocks cassettes and recordings of Thai, Chinese and Hmong music, traditional and rock. T-shirts proclaiming "Indochinese refugee camp survivor" are not very popular, Moua said.

About 25 percent of Long Cheng's customers are Hmong, Moua said. Business has been growing, but success has brought competition. In the last year, six or seven Hmong-owned stores have opened, he said.

Two Fresnoans who employ Hmong say they are very happy with their work.

Nick Ibey, manufacturing manager of Champion-Parts Rebuilders Inc., said he has asked the personnel office to hire only Southeast Asians.

"They're probably the best all-around assembly personnel I've ever seen," said Ibey, who first hired Hmong at the company's Los Angeles plant. The firm, which rebuilds automotive parts, employs about 400 people in Fresno.

Ibey said that Hmong workers seldom call in sick. And, he said, no refugee workers in the Los Angeles or Fresno plants have had on-the-job injuries.

"They're tough, independent people. Within a couple of years, they will be doing well."

George Winslow



Yang Ly, front, and Chong Pao Moua.

Fresno Bee photos by Carl Crawford

Farm

Continued from Page 7
poppies as a cash crop.

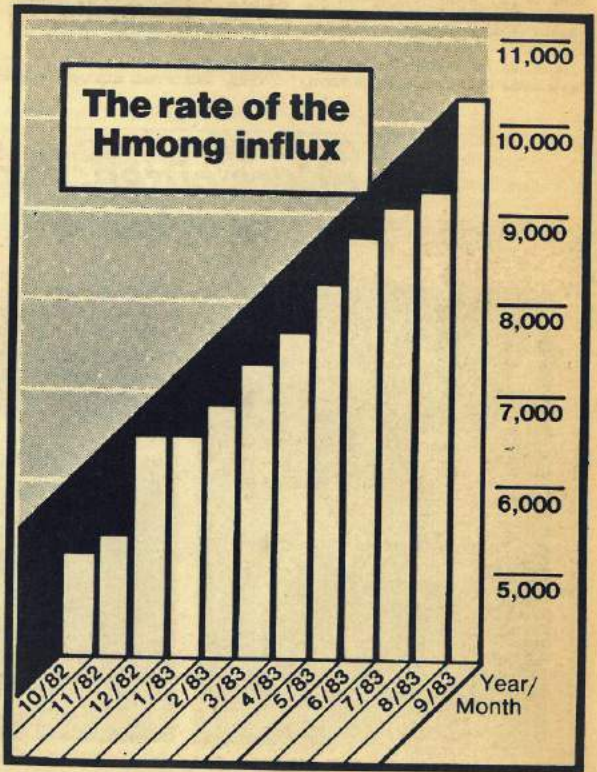
Yang Dao, a Hmong historian at the University of Minnesota, said that toward the end of the 18th century the Hmong began growing opium poppies in the mountains of China.

When the Hmong migrated to Laos, he said, they continued to raise the crop, which also was used as medicine.

Pedro Ilic, a farm adviser with the University of California Cooperative Extension Service who works with the Hmong and other small farmers, believes a fundamental issue is whether the valley can support more farmers.

"Personally, I do not think we can put 1,000 new farmers in Fresno County," said Ilic.

"Prices are depressed because of supply and demand," he said. "All of a sudden, where we had 100 acres of sugar peas, for example, and we



Fresno Bee graphic/Bob Campbell

Graph shows the rapid growth of Hmong in Fresno.



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Long Cheng Market mirror reflects owners Ge Moua, front, and Pheng Moua.

Employers have two practical incentives to hire Hmongs: attracting Hmong customers and getting a tax break.

Any employer who hires Hmongs or anyone else on welfare qualifies for the Targeted Jobs Tax Credit, said Pat Hendrix of the Fresno County Department of Social Services.

On federal tax returns, the employer can take a maximum credit of \$4,500 for a two-year period. On state returns, the maximum credit is \$600 for two years.

John Kuwamoto recently started All-Star Janitorial Service with two Hmong employees and has decided to hire only Hmongs in the future.

"Their strongest point is they want to work," he said. "I'm not able to pay them very much, but they're just thankful that I'm giving them a chance to work."

The Hmong



A struggle in the sun

Hmong take root in Fresno

By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER
Bee staff writer

The old man was confused.

Other Hmong had told him that refugees lose welfare after 18 months in the United States. Unable to speak English, he knew he wouldn't be able to find a job.

He couldn't turn to his children — they lived elsewhere. He didn't know where to go for help, or even which bus to take.

He decided that the only alternative was to kill himself. His attempt failed.

Elsewhere in Fresno, a 32-year-old Hmong — educated in a university and trained as a teacher — moves easily through all facets of city life.

In Santa Ana, he had been laid off from his job — teaching English to refugees. Undiscouraged, he moved to Fresno. He now works full time for the Fresno Adult School and, with his wife, owns a small grocery store.

The two stories illustrate the contrasting experiences of Hmong who are trying to fit into American life.

How they cope in their strange new world depends mostly on their age and education. Language and cultural differences, plus their inability to find work, have kept most Hmong almost as isolated as if they were still in the Laos highlands.

Vang Houa Thao, who works for Nationalities Service of Central California in Fresno, said he knows of at least two suicides and 10 attempted suicides by Hmong in the

last two years. Each, he said, apparently involved adjustment problems.

The most recent suicide occurred Sept. 21. Chao Wang Vang, 44, hung himself in Fresno County Jail after he had been charged with misdemeanor manslaughter in connection with a fatal traffic accident.

Family members said Vang, who did not speak English, took his own life because he was confused about his situation.

Debra Ramirez, Nationalities Service director, said mental health referrals are difficult.

"The clients often refuse to get services," she said. "They refuse to admit they have problems."

Hmong men seem to be hardest hit by what Thomas E. Addison of the county's acute psychiatric unit at Valley Medical Center calls a "double whammy."

Many of the men, accustomed to their roles as family providers, aren't working now. And, Addison said, the newfound assertiveness of their Americanized wives creates friction.

Hmong men also are involved in a baffling medical mystery that may be related to adjustment stress.

More than 30 — including two in Fresno — have died nationwide from Hmong Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome.

The Fresno victims, both in their late twenties, died in the middle of the night, said David Hadden, Fresno County coroner.

One victim began screaming just before he went rigid and died. The other man, also in bed, began

thrashing about and choking. He turned blue and died.

Although no conclusive causes for the deaths have been found, researchers speculate that the cause may be genetic or stress-related, said Bruce Thowpaou Bliatout, an Oregon Hmong who has studied the syndrome.

Another possibility, Bliatout said, is direct or indirect exposure to chemicals used by the Pathet Lao during the war in northern Laos.

The stress theory states that some Hmong males may be upset because they are unable to perform traditional religious ceremonies and rituals in their new land.

For Chay Her and Chue Yang Lee, a more immediate concern is housing.

The Lees and their nine children live in a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment. The crib for their baby daughter is in the living room, a few feet from the color television set. Two older brothers use the couch as a bed.

Cramped housing is typical for the Hmong. Fond of large families (the average size is seven, according to the county) the Hmong often cannot afford to rent large apartments or homes.

Chay Her Lee, 37, has been looking for months for a three-bedroom house that rents for about \$315 a month. He now pays \$245 a month for the apartment near First Street and Olive Avenue.

"We've found some, but the payment is too much," he said.

Most houses rent for at least \$350 a month, he said, and the ones in

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Teens bridge the gap between two cultures



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Hmong and American children mix easily in their classes at Wolters Elementary School in Fresno.

They love double whoppers from Burger King.

They play video games and soccer.

They listen to rock music, preferably Loverboy.

Typical American teen-agers?

"Not quite, but we're getting there," said 17-year-old Vang Lu.

Vang is among the more than 10,000 Hmong refugees who found a new home in Fresno after fleeing Laos.

The Hmong teens probably are the luckiest of the refugees. Because they are learning the English language and American culture in school, they are quickly bridging the chasm between the near-primitive life their parents knew in Laos and the fast-paced, technological life in the United States.

Although they don't remember much of Laos, several teens said they feel strongly about their homeland because of their parents' memories. But they said they also know their future lies in this country.

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A struggle in the sun

Life

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their price range are too far out in the country.

Mao Yang, like many Hmong refugees, said she had trouble adjusting to a modern apartment.

"I had never seen many of the things [appliances and conveniences] before," she said.

She said she didn't want to touch the washing machine because she thought it was dangerous.

Vu Yang said that the refugees often use the appliances incorrectly, which draws complaints from managers and other tenants.

Janice Walker, the manager of Valle Vista apartments in central Fresno, said she tries to acquaint the refugees with their apartments to prevent problems. Valle Vista has 26 Southeast Asian families in its 49 units.

But she defends the newcomers.

"If you took me to their country,

“The people in Fresno are trying to address the issue before it becomes a problem. That speaks well for the community.”

Joel Benavides

in their house, I would be at a total loss," she said.

Some landlords who rent to Hmong reportedly are beginning to get nervous about potential backlash from other tenants and neighbors who are grumbling about large families. But no incidents have been reported.

When it comes to health care, the Hmong often use both old country and modern methods. In Laos, they had used herbs as medicine and called on shamans — spirit doctors — for cures.

The shamans still flourish in Fresno, but the Hmong also visit doctors and clinics when they are sick.

Margaret Wing, a county public health nurse in charge of health screening for refugees, said the Hmong have illnesses common to the general population.

Though many are hosts for Laotian parasites, the parasites cannot be transmitted without close and prolonged contact.

Even the tuberculosis rate among Hmong is no greater than in the state's general population, Wing said.

Health care workers find that language and cultural barriers are common problems. Even bilingual health care staffers, Wing said, have trouble translating medical concepts to the Hmong.

Valley Medical Center, which treats many Hmong, does not have any employees who speak Hmong. The hospital must call upon volunteer interpreters.

But VMC operates a clinic for Hmong children every Thursday

morning, and uses high school volunteers as translators.

At Valley Children's Hospital, a staff translator helps ease the differences between Hmong and modern medical practices. The hospital also tries to accommodate Hmong traditions in the patient's care.

Those efforts take longer but are beneficial, said Linda Hoshino, a medical social worker.

In one case, she said, a baby born in another hospital was transferred to Valley Children's for surgery. The family was worried about separating the mother and baby because Hmong tradition holds that they must stay together for 30 days and eat a special diet of boiled chicken, pork and hot water.

Hoshino said the hospital allowed the mother to stay with the baby and the cafeteria prepared the special food.

Hoshino said Valley Children's social workers ask Hmong families if there are any traditional remedies they would like for their child. If the doctor thinks the treatment isn't harmful — for example, a special herb ointment — he approves it.

The Fresno Police Department also recognizes the language and cultural problems of the Hmong, said Sgt. Marvin Reyes, the department's Hmong expert.

Though the department lacks an employee who speaks Hmong, all Fresno police officers have attended a two-hour Hmong cultural awareness workshop.

Reyes said the Hmong rarely commit crimes, but they often are the victims of burglaries and thefts which they do not report.

He said the Hmong respect the police, but misunderstand their role. In Laos, he said, any government official who rendered a service had to be paid.

"They think the same is true here, so that inhibits service," he said.

The Hmong also do not report crimes because they cannot speak English, he said.

To overcome these problems, the police have distributed a Hmong-English flyer detailing how to contact authorities. The department also has met with Hmong and has urged them to develop Neighborhood Watch groups.

Chris Long, a state fish and game warden based in Fresno, is concerned about another law enforcement problem — illegal hunting and fishing.

"They seem to take whatever is in their way, without regard to season, bag limit or methods of take," he said. "They go out in large numbers with nets, and any way they can get fish, they get them. They shoot game with rifles, when you're not supposed to even have a rifle in some areas."

Most of the problems have occurred in the Mendota Wildlife Area west of Fresno, he said, and he has issued "a disproportionate amount" of verbal warnings and written citations to Hmong.

Long said he thinks Hmong misunderstand or don't know about the law.

"As a general rule, I think they're honest people who want to learn,"



Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

The Chay Her Lee family of Fresno is looking for a three-bedroom house.

he said, noting that he has had no repeat offenders.

Most Fresnoans who work with the Hmong cite understanding and a willingness to learn about the Hmong as an important factor in helping them to assimilate.

Joel Benavides of the U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service in San Francisco said he is impressed that Fresno has had no serious problems in absorbing the refugees.

"The people in Fresno are trying to address the issue before it becomes a problem," he said. "That speaks well for the community."

Taking the lead in educating the refugees and Americans about each other is the Central California Forum on Refugee Affairs. A

coalition of refugee groups and public and private agencies, the forum meets once a month to exchange information and ideas and work on ways to assist refugees.

The forum has drawn the attention of Sacramento and Washington, D.C., to the refugees' problems. Part of that attention has come in the form of cash.

Benavides said the forum probably has helped prevent the occurrence of any violence between Fresnoans and Hmong.

But resentment is developing, said Antonio Aguilar of the state Department of Fair Employment and Housing.

Union workers at one large employer in Fresno are afraid that

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Fresno Bee/Carl Crawford

Hmong boys play a spirited and traditional game of ka tao, in which a reed-like ball is kicked over a net.

No hooky, no discipline woes

Hmong students strive for education in Fresno schools

When Cheng Lee arrived in the United States four years ago at the age of 11, he had had only 2½ years of school.

Like most Hmong refugees, Cheng didn't know English. During his first weeks of school in Toledo, Ohio, he wondered if he'd ever learn the strange language.

But, encouraged by his parents, Cheng worked hard and discovered that he liked school.

When the family moved to Fresno a little more than a year ago, Cheng enrolled in Sierra Freshman School, now Career/Vocational Center. By the end of the school year, he had become a model student.

Cheng, who only a few years earlier was living in a refugee camp in Thailand, was named Best All-Around Student for his scholastic performance, spirit and diligence.

"I just never thought I was a good student," Cheng said. "I just keep on trying my best to learn. My parents encourage me. What they'd like me to do the most now is study and get a good education."

Chay Her Lee, Cheng's father, said he wants his children to have a good education because of his experiences in Laos.

"When I was in the army, I had to work hard and did not have enough food," said Lee, who was wounded twice in the war in Laos.

While not all of the Hmong schoolchildren in Fresno County are as successful as Cheng, their teachers say the refugee youngsters do share a desire to learn and a willingness to work hard.

"Most of them are very, very eager to learn," said Seth Atamian, principal of Wolters School near First Street and Shaw Avenue. "Education is a high priority."

Wolters has more than 100 Hmong students, about one-sixth of the school population, this year,

and another 150 or more refugees, mostly lowland Laotians.

Atamian and the school's teachers are enthused about the integration of the white, middle-class school.

But Dawn Magne, Wolters reading resource teacher, said that sometimes teachers must start at the very beginning with Hmong youngsters.

"We have had students who have never been to school, never held a pencil. It's like being on a different planet for them," she said.

Despite the difficulties, Magne said, the rewards are abundant

"The most beautiful thing is to see our American children join in and play their games from Laos."

Seth Atamian

for teachers, aides and other staffers.

"You can see the growth, it is so evident," she said. "It makes you feel so good."

Atamian added that the Hmong "don't play hooky on us" and are disappointed when schools are closed on weekends and holidays. Also, they rarely present discipline problems.

"I hope they don't get Americanized too soon in that respect," he said, grinning.

The principal said that after an initial period of shyness by American and Southeast Asian students, the youngsters mix well in the classroom and playground.

"The most beautiful thing is to see our American children join in and play their games from Laos," he said.

About 3,000-3,500 Hmong students are enrolled in Fresno Unified School District, 100 in

Clovis Unified, less than 200 in other Fresno County schools and perhaps 50 at Fresno City College and five at Fresno State University.

In addition, about 1,000 adults at the Fresno Adult School and about 350 at Clovis Adult School are taking English classes.

The big impact of the newcomers hit about three years ago, said Ruth Horne, Fresno Unified curriculum coordinator for multicultural education and English as a second language.

After initially reeling, the schools now are much better able to meet the needs of Hmong students and their teachers, she said.

Fresno Unified schools with the biggest Hmong populations are Mayfair, Wolters, Birney, Jefferson, Rowell, Lowell and Norseman.

"We have done cultural in-service training for teachers, principals, secretaries, bus drivers and others, so they are exposed to that and better able to handle it," said Horne.

The district has added teachers who teach only English as a second language plus ESL tutors, and has purchased special instructional materials for students learning English.

Fresno Unified received \$950,000 from the state for extra services for all students with limited English, about half of whom are Hmong. In addition, the district has about \$138,000 from the federal Indochinese Refugee Act.

While the addition of the Hmong students has strained the schools, Horne said the quality of education for other students hasn't suffered.

"In fact, the American children are going to grow a lot more by having the newcomers around them because they have so much to offer us," Horne said.

— By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER

Teens

Continued from Page 9

"There, we had to run all the time," said May Nor Lee, 17, a senior at McLane High School. "Here we have freedom to do things. We haven't had that in Laos since before the communists."

"Also there's not just rich or poor here. You can be in the middle."

The teens said they are comfortable at school and have American friends whom they socialize with at school and whose homes they visit.

"When we're at school we're the same as others," said Yang Ly, 19, a freshman at Fresno City College. "We tell jokes to the teachers and cause trouble. The only difference is when we go home."

At home, they said, their lives are more traditionally Hmong. Fathers rule the home and mothers cook Hmong dishes made with rice, meat and vegetables.

The teens know their lives will be different from those of their parents. They say they feel sorry for them because the older generation lacks their opportunities.

May Nor and her sister, May Pa Lee, 14, say their mother does not drive because their father won't let her.

They insist they won't be under a man's thumb when they marry.

Already the girls are rebelling: They ignore their father's orders not to wear eye makeup and lipstick.

"Now he doesn't say anything," May Nor said.

But May Pa, one of 11 children, is still a traditional Hmong in one sense: She wants a big family.

The teens realize that education is a key to success in the United States, and most of them want to go to college. They agree they should complete their education and get settled in jobs before marriage, in contrast with the Hmong tradition of early marriage.

Navy Vue, 19, also has an ulterior motive for waiting to marry: He thinks it might improve the chances that his children will be bigger than the usually slight Hmong.

"I hope the next generation will be taller!" he said.

Navy and Ying Van, 20, are thinking about enlisting in one of the branches of the service, and hope to become pilots. They said without hesitation that they would be happy to fight for the United States.

"Especially against the Russians," said Navy. "Those guys caused our troubles."

— By SHIRLEY ARMBRUSTER



Fresno Bee/Paul Kuroda

Hmong girl wears traditional clothes and a new watch.



A struggle in the sun

Life

Continued from Page 11

Hmong are working as union-busters, Aguilar said.

"There's a lot of resentment and racial slurs are beginning to fly," he said. "I feel there's a potential for violence."

On the other hand, community youth groups such as the Fresno County 4-H Club and the Boy Scouts are working to promote understanding between refugees and Americans.

The Sequoia Council of Boy Scouts is organizing a troop for refugee children. The new scouts eventually will be integrated into existing troops.

And 4-H members brought refugee children into their homes this summer to learn about the American lifestyle. Dana Sheesley, the 4-H member who coordinated the project, called the program a success.

"We're really into community service, and this helped us reach out to people who are sometimes ignored," she said. "It helped 4-

H'ers learn more and by doing that we can teach others."

Despite the efforts and good intentions of a few county residents, some Hmong remain uncertain about their future.

Mayyang Thaoxaochay, a Hmong who was educated at a university in France and speaks English, wonders if her people will ever be accepted.

"We are not citizens yet, but even if we are, we are an ethnic minority in this country," she said. "I think it will be harder to get higher positions because we are minorities."

Reyes, the Police Department's Hmong expert, said he hopes that will not be the case.

Reyes, whose father came to the United States from the Philippines, took a personal interest in the Hmong because he understands their assimilation problems.

"These people are the only ones that I know of who really backed our play in Southeast Asia," he said. "To now see these men subjected to abuses just bothers me to no end."

"They're people who helped us and they deserve help back."



Fresno Bee

TV is the gathering spot for Chay Her Lee's children in the family apartment.

Series edited by Steve Hensch

“These people are the only ones that I know of who really backed our play in Southeast Asia. To now see these men subjected to abuses just bothers me to no end.”

Sgt. Marvin Reyes



Fresno Bee

Va Seng Xiong cuddles his daughter, May Kou, 3.