Reflections of a Hmong Woman

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I am sometimes asked what it is, precisely, which has enabled me to make a difference in the lives of those around me. Born and raised in Laos at an exceptionally difficult time in that nation's history, I emigrated to the United States in 1979, at the age of sixteen, after years spent in the refugee camps of Thailand. With neither the ability to speak English nor any prior formal education, it was necessary to commence my high school studies far behind my peers; and yet, I acquired fluency in the language of my adopted country, went on to get a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, then completed work on the Ph.D. and took up a career as a professor of anthropology and ethnic studies at St. Cloud State University, where I now teach. By dint of hard work, and without the opportunity – or the time – for excuses, I applied myself to the various tasks which confronted me to arrive at my current situation, a situation in which I have been privileged to make a difference in the lives of young people.

There are those who have very kindly observed that this course of life has been remarkable; certainly it is somewhat uncommon, even for a life in a country in which the success of those newly arrived and willing to extend themselves is an old story. We are all aware, or should be, that this is a country in which hard work, coupled with intelligence and ambition, can produce remarkable results. And yet, there is more to the tale than intelligence and hard work, for this is a Hmong story, and we Hmong are well used to the need to overcome hardships. Hmong women have raised generations of successful Hmong, and deep in our hearts are images of the mother whose face is lined with the cares and worries of a thousand days of loving her children, children who will become adults and spend their lives in tending their own families. A closely knit family is always helpful, and often essential, to the success of its members, and many Hmong are familiar with the daughter who works at cooking and cleaning and mending clothes for a family with an ill or otherwise disabled mother. any such young women sacrifice themselves unsung to cheer their brothers at sport or in the classroom, only to be ignored for scaling equal, and even greater, obstacles. In the success of families, recognized as integrated units, and of an entire people, it is as much to her credit that others achieve as that she herself does. Let us never forget that her sacrifices make it possible for others to reap rewards.

By tradition, whenever I have been introduced in a traditional Hmong network setting—as, for example, in relation to a relatives', or kin, network—I have always been introduced as my father's daughter, not my mother's daughter; that is, as Mr. Ntxoov Zeb Tsab tus ntxhais (the daughter of Mr. Chong Ze Cha) or Koos Phas Ntxoov Zeb Tsab tus ntxhais (Captain Chong Zeb Cha's daughter). Yet, although I am not introduced as the daughter of Mrs. Ntxoov Zeb Tsab (or See Lo), we must never allow this to diminish our appreciation for the hard work

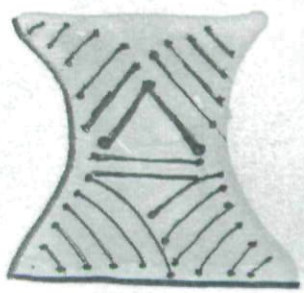
and sacrifice of our Hmong women. On the contrary, we must always bear in mind that in a social setting the prizes of one are awards to all, and thus in my career there have been many contributors to such laurels as I have been fortunate to capture. In my own case, indeed, this is particularly true in that my father went missing in action during the "Secret War" in Laos, when I was still a little girl, so that it was my mother who raised me and nurtured me throughout my entire life. Let this be an opportunity to bestow upon her the well-deserved recognition which she earned.

We should, then, elect herewith to underline the achievements of Hmong women, trusting that our Hmong men have received sufficient recognition heretofore to satisfy the human desire for the acknowledgment of effort. In so doing, it is not our intention to diminish the many successes of the Hmong male; rather, it is to emphasize for once the far less storied heights to which we Hmong women have risen. In thus favoring our female efforts, I begin with an elucidation of my own labors, as I acknowledge that there have been many people who have asked me how I became interested in the work I do and why I think it important to encourage Hmong women to attain positions of leadership.

To answer this question, I reflect back some ten or twelve years when I began to address a variety of issues of significance to Hmong women, as well as to the problem of social inequality generally. Naturally, I was concerned about my own rights as a woman, as a Hmong, and as an American. This narrow vision is perhaps somewhat characteristic of one who has yet to achieve a broad experience of life; however, my vision soon expanded to include the plight of many of those around me who were suffering under many of the same restrictions, and enduring many of the same difficulties, as I. It is, ultimately, a sense of social injustice in the face of such restrictions, coupled with a determination to overcome those difficulties, which has led me to walk the road I have chosen.

A sense of discomfort, and even outrage, at the injustices we all encounter in our lives was engendered—and grew strong within me—when I was very young. As a girl in Laos, a nation mired in war, I realized there was plenty of injustice to go around. For example, I cannot, to this day, forget the incident when one of my uncles *zij poj niam*, meaning he kidnapped an unwilling bride.

It was in the Hmong city of Long Chieng, in Xieng Khuang Province, Laos. I cannot recollect in what year or month it was, but the details of the event have remained with me to this day, and my memory of it is still vivid. What happened was, briefly, this: my uncle, it seems, fell in love with a young woman of the city, and attempting as best he could to communicate with her when the chance presented itself, pressed his suit, telling her he wished to marry her. She, however, had a boyfriend already and declined to accept my uncle as her suitor.



It was the daily habit of this girl to come to the market to sell beer, soft drinks, and other beverages. On one occasion my uncle arranged for an accomplice to greet her as she passed by our house on her way home, asking her to come inside where my uncle waited, and accept a letter for her father. It was a bold plan, given that she was accompanied by her boyfriend; yet, although she was a bit hesitant, she did not wish to seem impolite. Approaching, then, a few steps nearer, she paused to look back at her acknowledged suitor, and, sensing nothing unusual, took a few more steps. At this point, the accomplice went into the house to retrieve the letter in question, nothing more than an empty envelope. It was this empty envelope that the accomplice offered to the unsuspecting girl; when she reached for it, he grabbed her wrists.

With this, my uncle emerged suddenly from the house and carried the surprised victim

to the door to perform the "chicken ritual" according to which, by custom, she might become his own. The girl screamed for help and fought with all her strength to get away, but against her will she was forced inside, and, by tradition, became officially my uncle's wife. She could cry, scream, twist and turn, or complain until she was hoarse, but she would never again be free.

Perhaps two hours later, her stepmother arrived to take her home. However, as the girl's captors offered the older woman a large sum of money, the girl's stepmother reconsidered the situation, and, taking note of the social position and prestige of the family with which she would be allied as an in-law, she instructed her daughter to stop crying and behave like a new bride. The girl's protests fell on deaf ears.

The girl continued to cry, nonetheless, and to beg for her freedom, imploring her stepmother not to take any of the money offered, but, rather, to allow the imprisoned girl to return home. It was no use. My uncle and his associate, finding an ally in the girl's mother, treated the elderly woman like a queen. They bowed to her, cooked a big meal for her, gave her the promised money, and asked her to convince her daughter to stop resisting my uncle. When the stepmother left without taking her daughter with her, the girl shrieked in dismay.

For three days thereafter, the girl refused to eat, to drink, to take a bath, or to change her clothes. She did not wash her face or comb her hair, which had become badly snarled. She had given up all concern about her appearance and did not care how she looked. On one occasion, when a car drove by, she ran desperately into the street, hoping to be hit by the car and killed. It was an unsuccessful effort, since my uncle followed her everywhere she went, restraining her by force if she seemed ready to attempt an escape.

At the end of three days, my uncle and his wedding troupe were ready to begin the marriage ritual, which required them to go to the girl's family, bringing the girl with them. The girl was, of course, deliriously happy, but not for the reason expected. While she ran ahead of the group, her eyes were constantly on the ground around her, and, unbeknownst to anyone, she found what she sought. The group left for her parents' house in midmorning, and by noon the girl was dead by her own hand, having eaten a poisonous plant.

For his part in what most Hmong perceived as an effort consonant with an established Hmong marriage initiation, my uncle's only obligation was to pay the girl's bride price and apologize to her parents. Then he buried her and, paying all of her funeral expenses, ended the affair. As far as anyone was concerned, that was the end of her life.

Yet, as I grew older I learned from beautiful, young Hmong women that to be beautiful can be both a blessing and a curse. Beauty may multiply one's suitors, but it may also increase the likelihood of being forced into marriage before puberty, of being kidnapped (*zij*), and/or of being forced to become the second or third wife of a wealthy husband with a position of prestige and power in the community. At the same time, I also learned that not to be beautiful is a curse, inasmuch as potential suitors are diminished. A Hmong female may find herself, indeed, in a classic "no win" situation: either to be pursued by no males, or to be pursued by the wrong sort of males in the wrong circumstances. Is it any wonder that my attention began to shift from the options offered in the traditional setting of Hmong life to the possibilities inherent to the scholarly life! Puzzled and dismayed by the aforementioned realities, my observations centered on the attempt to ascertain why it was that such things have become the way they are. I wanted to understand, at least, even

if I could not make any changes at all in a system so fraught with inequity.

The ensuing years provided many such opportunities to observe, and to consider, social injustice. With Laos involved in the communist insurrections in Vietnam, war came to my village, and violence of a very grave variety was much in evidence. The Hmong people were widely recruited by the American Central Intelligence Agency as surrogate fighters in what the American administrations of the time sought to keep a secret war, and, with the abandonment of that war by America, the Hmong were severely persecuted by the new communist masters of Laos. Flight, and ensuing years spent in Thai refugee camps, followed, after which my family and I were permitted to come to the United States. Here, my education assumed a formal, classroom phase in California where I was able, with great effort, to attend high school. Thereafter, when the family moved again – this time to Colorado – I was able to earn a high school diploma and a baccalaureate at a local college, then shift my own studies to Flagstaff, Arizona, where I earned a Master's degree at Northern Arizona University. In addition, I spent six months studying at the University of London.

During this period, specifically in 1988 as an undergraduate at Metropolitan State College in Denver, I was invited to a conference of Hmong Catholics in Rhode Island to make a presentation on the role of women in Hmong society. From the time I started school in this country, I had not taken a standard class on the span and scope of Western Civilization, and did not know anything about the patriarchal structure of the Catholic church. In the context thus engendered, I made a statement which, at the time, seemed rather uncontroversial. I said that women are intelligent, capable, and hard-working people, and that, if the Catholic church, and society as a whole, exclude them from participating in major events, they are wasting half of society's intelligence.

Although this perfectly straightforward statement was unimpeachably logical, I noticed that, after my presentation, many of those present did not want to talk to me, including a priest. An especially beloved uncle, who had always been extremely proud of me, indicated he was feeling a degree of shame with me for placing Hmong gender roles in the spotlight. It was, to say the least, an awkward feeling I experienced that day, but I learned a lot from the reaction of my listeners. In 1989, there were twenty-five men of the Hmong community in Colorado who received a Bachelor's degree; I was the only Hmong female.

I found this disconcerting, and, in consequence, I co-founded the Hmong Women's Educational Association of Colorado and was elected its first President of the Board. The Association was established to provide support services to Hmong women, to promote higher education for them, and to preserve the Hmong cultural heritage. All of these, one might be forgiven for thinking, are laudable goals. And yet, within a span of three months, I received several anonymous, threatening phone calls demanding that I dissolve the Women's Association, as well as one letter threatening to bomb both my house and the offices of the group. Two members of my all-female Board of Directors, terrified by these threats and swayed by the social pressures they represented, quit their posts in consequence.

How did I respond to these threats? I said to my board members, "Let's keep a meticulous record of these threats; it will become a valuable historical document." I sincerely believed then, as I believe now, that neither I nor any of my board members had done anything wrong, and thus we had nothing of which to be afraid.

In 1992, I returned to the refugee camps of my childhood in Thailand, and to Laos, for

the United Nations Development Fund for Women. There I was tasked with the job of conducting research on Hmong and Lao women repatriating to Laos. At that time, there were many people and organizations asking, "What will happen to the refugee men who return to Laos?" No one seemed to care what would happen to the women and to their children. Who would protect these women? No one seemed to know. No one at all was asking, "Who will help them to build a house and to make a home if they're single, or if they're widowed or divorced?" I was the only one who was asking these questions, and, if I had not gone and had not conducted the research, I believe that no one would have done so. Clearly, then, the early conditioning I had received in the nature of social inequity

and social injustice had come slowly to bear fruit.

It was perhaps in the nature of my questions about the structure of my society which dictated that I become a cultural anthropologist, a university professor, a researcher, an author, an activist, a scholar. After all, while rising to maturity, I had experienced much culture shock and intergenerational conflict. The previously related tale of my uncle's abduction of the girl who had the misfortune to catch his eye is one example. As another, I might recall something in the nature of school life in California.

Among those in Hmong society of my generation, a polite and well-mannered Hmong female might never wear a skirt or pants shorter than the knee, and any female who did so was automatically and peremptorily judged a prostitute. Accordingly, I always dressed with my body well covered, especially after puberty. Imagine my consternation, therefore, when, as I began high school, my American physical education teachers insisted I wear swimming suits and shorts. To refuse was to receive a grade of 'F' for the day.

As will be appreciated, I was shocked and dismayed. I was so shy and so self-conscious about exposing my body to the view of others that, during the first few times I did so, I could not concentrate on anything. More than that, the Hmong boys of my generation had never seen a Hmong girl in anything so brief and so revealing as a swimming suit and, in consequence, could not take their eyes off us girls. To make matters worse, they often made fun of us, and called out offensive comments about the bodies of those girls of whose forms they disapproved.

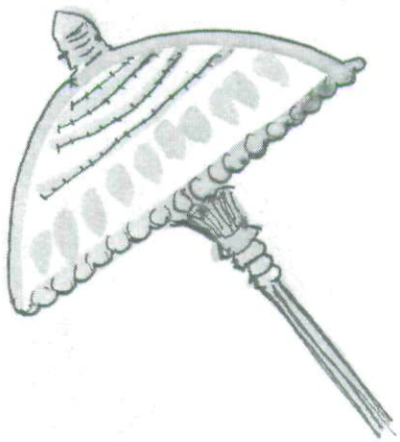
Of course, all of this was done in the Hmong language, so the American physical education teachers did not know what was happening. If that were not enough, not only did we find ourselves the butt of harassment from our own people, but, because we did not speak English well, and because we were newcomers, we also experienced much name calling, frequent discrimination, and continual racial harassment from the mainstream student population.

In fact, I can remember one student who sat behind me in class, and who often secretly placed his bubble gum in my hair after he finished chewing it. I could not remove the gum when I got home, and was forced to cut my hair. Of course, after I had cut that spot, I had to cut the rest of my hair to match its length – something which made me furious. It should come as no surprise to anyone that, largely because they are unable to endure such

mistreatment, many Hmong girls drop out of school to get married and start having children.

As for myself, I reacted to these challenges by studying harder, in the hope that someday I might become an educator who could influence younger generations to understand and to appreciate the rich cultural diversity of society – both of Hmong society and of the American society of which we Hmong Americans now form a part. I reasoned that the actions of one person, multiplied many-fold, can significantly alter the lives of all, and therefore, by acting in concert, we constitute a powerful force for change.

I thus pursued the career path I have selected both in order to achieve my own level of understanding and to create a generalized and positive influence through social action and by passing this understanding on to others. When I am therefore asked what it is that has enabled me to make a difference in the lives of those around me, I reply that it is hard work, intelligence, education, and ambition, in addition to a sense of justice and fair play and the desire to see everyone, regardless of background or tradition, have the chance to lead a happy and fulfilled life. We might argue that these are American views, inherited from an American society of which I have become a part. I prefer to think they are human views, and that they are precisely the sorts of views each and every one of us should – indeed, must – embrace if the world is ever to become the place we would wish for ourselves and for our children.



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