



# Asians Ascending

by lydia strohl

*for the agrarian, clan-based hmong, america's streets haven't been paved with gold. but for those who are finding their niche in a new economy, life is slowly getting a little sweeter.*

May Xiong is a 33-year-old single mother, with long dark hair and dancing black eyes. She can neither read nor write English, so she's thankful for her job on the line at iCorps, in Brooklyn Center, outside of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn., assembling microwave and other electronic components. When work got slow at her last job, it took months to find another one.

Even though she is employed, she worries constantly. Her husband left her three years ago, and \$7.96 an hour isn't enough to feed her and her six kids. After rent and utilities, she has \$10 to \$20 left in her pocket every month. She also gets \$200 a month in state food assistance, which she stretches by buying 100 pounds of rice at a time, or a whole pig.

"If I had more help or child care, I would go to night school but I don't want to leave my kids," says May. Just to make the 35-mile trip to work on time, she must leave her children, ages 9 to 16, to get themselves to school. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. And sometimes, the police call her to pick one of them up at the police station. May doesn't know what she'll do if her 13-year-old is expelled from school for "borrowing" a car he and some friends took for a joyride.

When she calls her husband – who she says left her for a "smarter" woman and continually ducks his court-ordered \$1,000 a month child-support payments – for help, he yells at her. She and her children came to St. Paul from Fresno in 1996, leaving her parents and siblings behind. Now, she has no one to turn to.

"I think they have a lot of jobs here so I came here, just me and my kids," says May, who has been trying to tell her story in English but, crying, lapses into Hmong.

"She is constantly thinking about her children alone, and what to do," translates Foua Hang, her 27-year-old social worker, eyeing the tissue box herself.



## strange land, unfamiliar ways

May's story, a familiar one to Foua, has a terminally heart-wrenching quality. The Hmong were resettled here after the Vietnam War. Today, there are 200,000 to 300,000 Hmong nationwide. Subsistence farmers by tradition, they struggle with the practices and protocols of America's business economy. Most compete against poverty and illiteracy, making the Hmong a stark exception to the American stereotype of successful, overachieving Asians.

Hmong means free, and for centuries this nomadic tribe lived a peaceful life in the Laotian highlands, until they took the side of first the French and then the Americans against the communists. In the '60s and '70s, foreigners supported this daring force of guerrilla fighters by air-dropping rice and other staples to the Hmong in exchange for their loyalty in a war-torn land.

Then the United States pulled out of Vietnam, leaving the Hmong to fend for themselves. The ruling communist Pathet Lao vowed to exterminate them, forcing entire families of the proud, clan-based people to flee their homeland, with their children on their backs. Some made their way through the jungle and forged the Mekong River to Thailand, where the U.S. had set up refugee camps.

Many died, but those who reached Thailand have been resettled around the world, many in the U.S. Initially, they came primarily to California, particularly to Fresno and Sacramento, where the agricultural economy suited their skills. Though few Hmong are still coming to the U.S. – in 1998, just nine entries were recorded – they are still moving. The largest concentration live in Minnesota and Wisconsin, where unemployment is low.

Driven by welfare reform and clan loyalty, one family member will venture North, and secure a job and a home. Then, the rest of the typically large clan – Hmong families have an average of six children – will move to join him or her. Also drawing people North is the prevalence of charitable nonprofits. In the wake of U.S.-run refugee camps, faith-based groups – particularly the Lutheran church – have traditionally been the mobilizing forces behind Hmong resettlement.

"We say pack a lunch when you go look for work here, because you're sure to find a job," says Fu Hang of the Asian Development Corporation in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which today boasts the largest Hmong community outside of Thailand, and probably the most prosperous. Second-generation Hmong with degrees have created a professional middle class and an estimated 250 Hmong businesses. *Mpls St. Paul* magazine even included a Hmong woman – Bao Vang, a Bush Foundation fellow, former co-director of the Hmong National Organization and a mother at 14 – in its list of 100 People to Watch this



year.

### **hard lives and war ghosts**

But while some young Hmong have succeeded, for others life here is not as free as they had hoped. Their new master is poverty. Bereft of English and the skills valued in an industrial economy, elders of the clan are no longer revered. Young and old alike rely on welfare, or participate in an alternative street economy buoyed by a new clan structure of gangs and accompanied by violence, drugs and lawlessness. Women must work outside the home to make ends meet. The community is rocked by depression, domestic violence and teen pregnancy. The latter, which occurs mostly among married young women, is the cultural norm for the Hmong. But here, it becomes yet another avenue to poverty.

May is one of three women who have left their children at home to come to the Women's Association of Hmong and Lao in St. Paul on this subzero night and tell me their stories.

"I wanted to share my feelings with you," says Lou Lee, age 35, a single mother of five children, ranging in age from 4 to 16, "because for women with no skills and no language life is hard all the time. You are on your own all the time and [there's] no one to share it with or to help."

The cryptic logo on her secondhand purple coat reads: "This very relaxed and natural look is simple to achieve." But for Lou, nothing is simple. She came to the U.S. four years ago from a Thai refugee camp, where she and her family had stayed for years, members of a minority of Hmong who hoped against hope they might one day go home.

Finally realizing they would never go home, they came here; then her husband abruptly left her. Not that she misses him; she says he beat her and kept the assistance checks for himself. But Lou herself doesn't grasp English at all, and as a result, is seemingly unemployable. She can produce the intricate needlework that's a trademark of her culture, which some Hmong women have turned into a source of revenue. But she says needlework is out of the question lately because she is too stressed for the intense, painstaking handiwork. Lou attributes this to her situation, though it may also be post-traumatic stress disorder. Ghosts of the war still haunt many Hmong. They share a quality I can only describe as shell-shocked: Though the war was over years ago, the challenges of life here continually bombard them.

### **neighbors with machetes**

Lou's demeanor reminds me of a Hmong family I met a decade ago on assignment for *Pittsburgh Magazine*. Despite their poverty and perpetual bewilderment at American culture, they were full of grace. Whenever I dropped in to chat, Mrs. Vue

would insist on feeding me fresh spring rolls or a soup of glass noodles. When I bought a new home, the entire family came with machetes to tame my unwieldy tangle of lawn. Uncomfortable with the concept of single women in their thirties, Mr. Vue would call to check on me and my dating status, not so subtly outlining the benefits of marriage. It took years for these proud, close-knit Hmong to trust strangers.

So I am honored by Lou's confidences. She tells me she is looking for some kind of assembly-line job, and has been since 1998. She's applied to more than 15 places to date, with no luck. She raises her children on \$760 a month in cash assistance and \$300 in food stamps. She is lucky to have public housing, paying under \$200 a month for a four-bedroom apartment, but another \$200 to \$300 for utilities. That leaves about \$500 a month to feed six hungry mouths.

It's better than the money May Xiong earns at her job. The 1996 welfare reform law imposes a five-year maximum limit on family assistance, but gives states the ability to end benefits earlier. Minnesota has not, but Lou Lee's assistance, regardless, will end in 2003. She must find work. Jim Anderson, planning specialist for low-income and homeless services in Ramsey County, estimates that of the 70,000 Hmong in Minneapolis, 45,000 to 48,000 reside in the county. And although assistance is hard to track, he estimates almost 2,000 Hmong families receive cash assistance through Minnesota's welfare program, and more than double that number receive some kind of medical assistance. Cases like Lee's confound him.

"They have the triple whammy," says Anderson. "Those who remain on assistance had no education when they arrived, and were parents so had little opportunity to get education. It's been a struggle. There's no one magic-bullet solution."

### **they are family**

Across the country, the story is the same. "We do have a small percentage who are very well off," earning in the upper \$70,000-to- \$80,000 range a year, says Fong "Jonathan" Her of the Hmong National Development Corporation, in Washington, D.C. "Most are just getting by."

Some innovative solutions have emerged. Minnesota has begun training programs with employers, teaching job skills and work-related English. Wisconsin has decreased welfare dependence from 72 percent in 1987 to less than 2 percent today. The key, according to Sue Levy, director of Wisconsin's office of refugee services, is helping one family at a time – and seeing large families as a plus, not a minus.

"It allows them to pool their resources – like splitting shifts, and child care. The whole family, working together, is their normal coping strategy," says Levy.

But poverty is still overwhelming. In Wisconsin, most Hmong families with school-age children qualify for school-lunch programs. Many are disabled by physical and mental conditions stemming from the war. Some cannot work at all; others are stuck in low-wage jobs.

"The younger generation is promotable. But the older generation, which lacks the English and education, probably makes in the \$6-to-\$10 range and does not progress readily," says Levy. "Ten dollars an hour for a single wage-earner in a household of six to eight is not enough. But if you combine wage earners, it becomes more tenable."

### **navigating the marketplace**

Entrepreneurship hasn't taken off as hoped yet, either. Nationwide, there is a spate of nonprofits bent on helping would-be Hmong business owners. But they are having a tough time.

"The Hmong are different," says John Else, chair of the Institute for Social and Economic Development, funded by Health and Human Service's Office of Refugee Resettlement to support micro-enterprise programs. "There is no tradition of business – they are really subsistence farmers. But there are younger Hmong who have attended college, and better-educated adults who are able to understand the business culture."

Fledgling Hmong businesses capitalize on traditional skills. Where there is land, like in Fresno, and parts of North Carolina and Washington state, Hmong are starting agriculturally based businesses. In cities and suburbs, such as St. Paul, and in parts of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, they are getting into service industries – real estate, translation, dry cleaning, auto mechanics. Temporary services are welcomed by a community like the Hmong, whose nomadic past makes transience a familiar state. Don't read transience as homelessness – though St. Paul has a dire housing problem, Anderson says he's surprised by how few Hmong have sought housing in city shelters. So far, he says, the community has taken care of its own.

"By tradition, the Hmong are hard-working. They want a better future for their kids," says Hang of the Asian Development Corporation. "A lot of them by nature are entrepreneurs, but don't have the skills to put it on paper in a structure the bank can recognize." Given their nomadic past, taxes and land-use rules are foreign to the Hmong, making issues like financial reporting and zoning laws problematic. Recently, officials in the Twin Cities area cited a Hmong-owned slaughterhouse, which had catered to cultures holding ritual animal sacrifices, for violating several ordinances.



## pho and grass jelly drinks

Hmong businesses can also fail to attract the local economy. Shua Xiong founded Golden Harvest Foods on the site of a popular community market, but hasn't been able to draw neighborhood patrons. "We've lost some mainstream customers," he says, leading me through aisles piled high with burlap bags of rice, offering me a grass jelly drink and proudly pointing out vacuum-packed black chicken – a real delicacy. "They don't understand us, and we don't understand them."

When they do succeed, most Hmong businesses are Mom-and-Pop endeavors, not growth industries. Many entrepreneurs must also work in the street economy or in factories to support their large families. Though an average of five or six children was once common, today more educated Hmong have just two or four.

The culture has evolved in other respects. In 1960, the Hmong depended on a barter system. But "in 20 years, we've become retail-oriented," says Kou Vang, a Hmong commercial banking officer at Western Bank, tracing traditional economic progress from barter, to retail, to manufacturing and services – an area into which few Hmong have yet crossed. "We have to accumulate the wealth and resources."

On St. Paul's University Avenue, Hmong influence is already clear. Once bleak, this area is being revitalized by Asian businesses. Pho (the traditional Vietnamese noodle soup) shops dot the blocks. There are Hmong insurance agencies and bakeries. And there is the Hmong ABC, Arts, Books and Crafts, St. Paul's first Hmong bookstore, where most of the books are in English. In a culture without a common written language, that, indeed, speaks volumes for progress.

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