

**PACYINZ LYFOUNG**

Narrator

**MAYKAO HANG**

Interviewer



**MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**ORAL HISTORY OFFICE**

Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society

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## **HMONG WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Minnesota is home to one of the largest Hmong communities in the United States. More Hmong live in the Twin Cities than in any other urban area in the United States. Originally from Laos, the Hmong supported American troops during the Vietnam War. Beginning in 1976 and continuing in four waves until 1996, many came to the United States as political refugees. The Hmong have strong kinship and clan ties. Many who originally were resettled in other areas, chose to move to Minnesota to be close to family members and other relatives.

The elder women's experiences included maintaining home and family while their husbands fought alongside American soldiers in the Vietnam War. They fled their farms and villages and crossed the Mekong River into Thailand where they lived in refugee camps before resettling in the United States.

The experiences of the oldest members of the community are vastly different from those who came here as children and those who were born in this country. Today, Hmong women work as teachers, lawyers, and decision makers in their respective positions—opportunities not available to them in their homeland. The youngest never experienced war or resettlement and are unfamiliar with the privations of their elders.

This oral history project chronicles the contributions and experiences of Hmong women with ties to Minnesota. Members of the Hmong Women's Action Team, a group of Hmong women community leaders and activists, interviewed each other and their mothers and grandmothers, and in one case her daughter. They share their stories of life in the Minnesota, Thailand, and Laos. Three generations from six different families are represented in this series of eighteen interviews.

The interviews help provide a greater understanding of Hmong women's roles in the home and community, challenges and successes in public and private realms, and across time and space.

Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society



**PACYINZ LYFOUNG**

Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society

**An Interview with**

**Pacyinz Lyfoung  
Narrator**

**MayKao Hang  
Interviewer**

**On  
December 17, 1999**

**For the  
Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project  
Hmoob Thaj Yeeb Oral History Project**

Hmong Women's Action Team Oral History Project  
Minnesota Historical Society



## **Pacyinz Lyfoung**

**MH:** This is the interview for Pacyinz Lyfoung, on December 17, 1999, at the Riverwood Inn. First, I'm going to ask you questions about your background, demographic questions. What is your maiden name?

**PL:** Pacyinz Thiong Lyfoung.

**MH:** And, are you married, and if you are married, what is your married clan name?

**PL:** I'm not married.

**MH:** How old are you right now?

**PL:** I'm thirty years old.

**MH:** Do you have any children?

**PL:** No.

**MH:** What is the highest education level that you have achieved?

**PL:** I have a Jurist Doctorate from the University of Minnesota Law School.

**MH:** What kind of job do you have?

**PL:** Right now, I'm a Policy Specialist for the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency which is a state agency.

**MH:** What is your income range: \$20,000 or below, \$20,000 to \$50,000; \$50,000 to \$75,000 or \$75,000 to \$100,000?

**PL:** \$20,000 to \$50,000.

**MH:** What is your current living situation. Are you living by yourself, with a spouse and other family members, just with your spouse or with no relatives?

**PL:** I'm living by myself.

**MH:** What is your material status, single or married?

**PL:** I'm single.

**MH:** How many years have you been in the United States?

**PL:** This December, I'll have been in the United States for fourteen years.

**MH:** And did you directly come to the United States or did you come directly from Laos or did you live in another country before you came to the United States?

**PL:** Actually I was second generation, western born. I was born in France and lived there until I came to the United States.

**MH:** So you were born in France?

**PL:** Yes.

**MH:** What categories of Hmong do you belong to, White Hmong, Green Hmong, or Stripe Hmong?

**PL:** White Hmong.

**MH:** What is your religious affiliation, are you practicing ancestral worship or have you converted to Christianity?

**PL:** I'm a little bit in between, my family has never been practicing too much the traditional ancestral worship, although as my parents are getting older they have started to be more interested in the traditions. As for myself, living in the United States I have, of course, been exposed to and explored Christianity. At one point, I was thinking about converting to the Lutheran faith and talked to my parents about it, and they were not supportive, so I've decided not to at this time, and since then I just haven't thought about it again.

**MH:** Now I am going to ask you about your childhood. Can you start telling me about when you were a child? Did you attend formal schooling?

**PL:** When I was a child, I was in France, so yes, I did attend formal schooling. I did what the other French children were doing. We must have been the only Asian family in town. And I started school when I was about three years old because that's how young children start school in France, and we go to kindergarten like at three years old. Then after that, we have a system that is comparable to the system in the U.S.

**MH:** What type of chores were you responsible for?

**PL:** When I was a child, I guess my family was a little less traditional than other Hmong families and I remember growing up very much, probably the way that many western children grow up. Meaning that we were given the opportunity to be children and not have too many responsibilities. So, the only thing that I can really think of was, for example, the fact that I was twelve years old and I had my youngest baby brother that was born, then I spent more time babysitting him and taking care of him than probably, western, young girls would have done.

And then I remember coming to the U.S. and, actually living in the Hmong community and meeting Hmong young women and becoming friends with them. And I remember being very impressed by the fact that, they were doing many more chores than I was doing, and I especially remember my best friend and, thinking about how she would be coming home from school and as soon as she got home she would be doing the laundry, she would be doing the cooking and dinner for her parents and her siblings. It was ready by 5 p.m. the time her parents got home. It just really amazed me, and I was sitting, and I thought that wow, I'm so far removed from what the traditional Hmong young women would be doing. And it was a very interesting experience just to see that as a young Hmong woman who was not raised traditionally. I was not doing the same things that other young women were doing.

**MH:** Did you perform any community service work when you were a child or growing up?

**PL:** Not really, in France for example, the concept of community service didn't really exist. Then by the time I came to the U.S., I think I didn't start to be involved in community activities until the time I was in college, and of course by that time I was no longer a child.

**MH:** As a girl, what were some skills that you were taught?

**PL:** As a girl, I remember spending time with my aunt, and I had two aunts that I quite enjoyed being with. Two of my father's sisters. And, one of them was probably one of the first women who pursued a post secondary education. Before the war, she was a student in the School of Dentistry and she was still unmarried, and she had time to spend with her brother's children. So, from her, I learned to do crochet, and I learned knitting, and then from my other aunt who was married but she just really enjoyed doing activities with young children and even now she always spends a lot of time with the children in the family. Oh, I learned from her was baking and she also, she was very much into the concept of 'women and girls have to be really pretty,' so I learned how do hair and then she likes to put make-up on little girls and things like that, so it was enjoyable when I was a little girl.

**MH:** What were some of the social activities that you remembered, for example, courtship?

**PL:** Well, I guess in terms of social activities that I remember, from the time when I was a child, I do remember families get-togethers and, the fact that, when I was a child, my parents and my father's brothers and some of their friends were part of the rather relatively small community of exchange students in France. So, they all knew each other and, they spent time getting together, because of that common bond, and, being that small community of exchange students from Laos.

I remember that they were all very young and they had fun. I mean, I actually have pictures that also remind me of how life must have been for all those young people who

were some of the brightest minds in Laos and that's why the government of Laos had invested in them and sent them on scholarships to go study abroad, so they would be able to come back to Laos and help the country develop and become more modern. I remember, I guess thinking about that, of course, looking back, it's unfortunate that the war happened and, a lot of those hopes did not come true at all.

Some of the most vivid memories that I had as a child were actually from the cultural events that we had for the students who were abroad. One of the most important events that they always celebrated was the—I think it must not have been the Hmong New Year, but I think it was the Lao New Year because it was students from Laos. And, Hmong students were also from Laos and therefore we were celebrating the Lao New Year. And I remember that my aunt was dancing traditional Lao dances with some of the other Lao young women. And, that was my exposure to my cultural background.

I think at that time of course for Hmong people who lived in Laos, they had Lao citizenship and, they were...kind of starting to integrate, at least some of them, starting to integrate into the Lao community, in the Lao culture, so that they did look at the Lao New Year as one of their traditions also. I think that, especially as a child, it was a very happy and very beautiful event, because people would be wearing all those traditional, the Lao traditional costumes. For the women, it was always silk skirts and silk tops, and then the women would be wearing flowers over their hair and it was just really beautiful and kind of, something that really stood apart. And, I think that from those childhood memories, I have some very, kind of magical memories of traditional events.

**MH:** What was your aspirations as a child?

**PL:** When I was a child, I guess, for whatever reason, I think maybe because all of the young adults that were around were also students or at least, they had spent a lot of their times studying, when I was a child. Actually, they only mostly talked to me about studies and about the fact that, I had to get good grades, and actually I was getting good grades. So, the comments that I heard from, the adults that were taking care of me, and that I respected and admired were that wow, you know, you are such a good student and you really have to become a doctor or lawyer or become very educated. So, ever since I can remember being in school, my aspiration has always been to do well in school, and pursue an education, and achieve a high level of higher education just because I think that was the feedback that I heard from my family, so that's my recollection of my childhood, my childhood's aspirations.

**MH:** Let's talk about women's roles. What are some of the jobs that women had when they lived in Laos?

**PL:** Well, from what I have heard—I heard stories when I was a little bit older and I was more interested in learning about the older women in the family, and especially my grandmother and great aunt, my great aunt who is my father's sister. And so when I came to the U.S. I learned to speak Hmong, and I was able to actually communicate with the older women.

So, I listened to the stories from my grandmother and she talked mostly about the fact that because she was married to Tou By Lyfoung who was a leader in the Hmong community, she saw her role as she was the second wife, they had three wives in the marriage, but for whatever reasons she became the wife that really took care of the household, and was very much aware and conscious about her husband's public life. So, she seems to have spent a lot of time being a good hostess, making sure that the household was running properly so that her husband would not have to worry about internal issues in the household. She was cooking, coordinating cooking quite a bit because there were guests most of the time.

She was also coordinating the extended family, because I think at the time, a lot of the Hmong families were living in extended families settings, and especially in my grandfather's household, because he was the patriarch of the family. He had his brothers living with him and then, his brothers' families, and so it was pretty much, from what I understand, a family compound, and, of course somebody had to kind of organize everything. So I think my grandmother spent quite a bit of time doing that.

And then, from what I heard from my great aunt who was the daughter of an important man also, but when she talks about her life she mostly talks about how she was helping with the farming. And she spent most of her time in the fields, and then later on, she got into trade, and so, she spent time at the market, trading. That would be for that generation.

For my mother's generation and my aunts' generation, what I understand is that, of course, they were helping a little bit in the household with some of the women's chores. That also, I think what was different about their generation and, maybe, just, their set is that many of my aunts were some of the first women who were able to pursue an education. So, quite a few of them were studying to be teachers, or they were sent to, actually not many of them, only one of my aunts, was sent abroad to pursue her education there. And then a lot of the other young women stayed in Laos where they studied to either, to become nurses or teachers, which were the two acceptable professions for women at the time.

As for my mother, she got married relatively young compared to other women in her generation in the family that I know. So, she was mostly a housewife when she was younger, and then became a mother and was taking care of her children.

**MH:** What type of chores were considered women's work?

**PL:** Women's work: taking care of children, taking care of her household, taking care of the fields, carrying produce, ... I think that women were also... well I, always remember my aunts being very busy preparing parties and preparing social events and, I'm not sure if the men were very much into doing that for social events or not. But I clearly remember the women being much more involved in, like, preparing for families get-

together or preparing for some of the cultural activities that were taking place in France. Yes.

**MH:** How did women make decisions in their family?

**PL:** For my grandmother and my great aunts' generation, it seems that there were what has been called different skills of decision making for men and for women. And so, I think that they were very much involved in decision making about what was happening internally within the family and with the household, and they got to make a decision, I think mostly because of the place where they were at in the family, like my grandmother was the middle wife, but she was also the wife who had the primary duties in the family and in the household, so that carries quite a bit of authority.

And, then for my great aunt, I think what happened in my great aunt's life was that she was married twice, but for whatever reasons she had periods of time in her life when she did not have a husband, and I think that made a difference in terms of the kinds of decision making that she was able to do, so it was more circumstances I guess that gave her greater decision making authority.

**MH:** Who were some women in leadership roles and how were they seen?

**PL:** Well, back then, and I guess hearing stories from the older people, I think that in the past, some women did have authority and leadership just because they were married to the men leaders, and I think, even nowadays when people, talk about women leaders, like *poj nom* they don't really talk about really women who are in leadership positions, but they are talking about the wives of the men who are in leadership positions. And, I think that in itself carried authority and responsibility, and because you were married to a man who was a leader in your community, then there were expectations of those women, and they were, of course, respected for privileges that came along with that. So, I think that, that's how leadership used to be defined for women in, in the past.

**MH:** What did women do to support their families economically?

**PL:** Women, I think women were very involved in making sure that there was always food on the table, which could have meant working in the fields or doing the cooking or, maybe even just supervising other people who would be doing those things. And then women were also involved in the economic life of a family, in the sense that they were given the responsibilities of running the household, and taking care of the family, so that the men would be freed up to take, to play a greater role in the greater community, and I guess that helps to raise the status of a man, and so, I do see that connection for Hmong women. The fact that, whether it has been, and actually I think it is somewhat acknowledged in the Hmong community that a man who is in a leadership position does need a wife who can take care of things for him.

**MH:** How were families planned? What kinds of things did women do to have fewer children?

**PL:** I'm not exactly sure. I'm not aware of birth control methods or even if family planning was taking place. But, what I have heard from my older relatives has been that, for example, my grandmother had many pregnancies but also many miscarriages, and so I guess that, and it could have been the times or it could have been that maybe she was just having too many pregnancies and because of that she was, I mean, there were some pregnancies that she was not able to carry to term. So I guess that was one way that birth was controlled, a very negative natural way I guess.

Then from my great aunt, what I heard is that, she also suffered several miscarriages but, what she talked about was more that she was always working really hard, and some of her miscarriages happened because she was working too hard, and, as a woman she never really had time to rest. And, I'm not truly sure what it was, but apparently, women who were pregnant at that time, did not carry, I mean they still carried a very heavy workload, and of course, that affected some of the pregnancies.

**MH:** When were you most respected and when were you most disrespected?

**PL:** I think and I would put that in the present, for me, I have found out that, in the Hmong community, I have been most respected, because of my educational achievements. The fact that we have an increasing number of Hmong women lawyers, but it is still rare enough that there is some respect that follows that.

Then, as far as disrespect goes, I think that, from my own personal experience, it has been when I was a very vocal and kind of labeled the most, one of probably the most radical Hmong women who was advocating on behalf of women's issues. There was, I think, there was some disrespect in the sense that we, our community, suffered a great loss in 1998 when we had a woman who killed her six children, and, there were many—it was a very complex case, but the whole case made the Hmong community very uncomfortable about women's issues, and, I think, one of the reactions to the case was to think how really that the problem came about and how that tragedy happened.

Was it because that woman was very evil as opposed to thinking that the tragedy happened because there really was a problem within the community in terms of women's issues. And, I think that, it was especially hard, . . . at times, for the Hmong community because I think a lot of people were, of course, hurting and it was difficult to look at the tragedy and to really try to address the issues. So, I think that it was just not a good time to be speaking out on women's issues, and, so it backlashed on women who were advocating on women's issues. That was the time when I really felt like it was really difficult to be a Hmong woman in the leadership position advocating on women's issues.

**MH:** The next section is about living in the refugee camps, and I think we'll skip that section because . . . you didn't live there.

**PL:** But, I think what I would say about, I won't talk too much about the refugee experience, but I'll just talk, maybe, about my own perception of the world, I guess

because I would like for that to be recorded, and I think what I like to say is that, growing up, being born in France and growing up in France and, having never (been in camps) what needs to be recorded is the experience about someone who has not exactly experienced the refugee camps, but can see how the refugee experience has also impacted and felt like it was the end of a life.

What I would say about the refugee experiences, would be that when the war happened, and when the flight from Laos took place, I must have been about—I would say, well, in 1975 I was 6 years old—but the way, I think, my life changed, as a result of the war, was that I started to have more relatives in France, because people came, and they were from Laos. And I finally met my grandmother and I met many cousins that I had never seen before. And I guess at the time, I did not realize what we why that was happening, but now I know what happened. I know that it happened because the war was going on, and, so the family was reunited in their negative circumstances, but, it happened that way.

I also know that, one of the big differences that was made at the time was that many of the students that were studying in France at the time, their studies were disrupted because, many of them were there on government scholarships, and, of course, after the war, the government scholarships were no longer there. And, plus a lot of the young students who were in France saw their relatives joining them as refugees in France. So many of them had to quit their studies and go to work to support their families.

I know, for example, that in my parents' case, that my mom who had never gone to work before, went to get a job and helped support my father so that he would be able to continue his education. So, I think that it has always been a puzzlement to me that—although in my own personal life, in some ways I have not directly experienced the war or the refugee experience, but because it happened to my family, because of that, I guess, I do identify as a refugee. I do identify with the refugee experience, although it's a different experience from, I guess, having actually have gone through the camps, and experiencing the living in the camps, and fleeing from the country.

**MH:** Can you tell me about how you came to America and what it was like? Your adjustments to life in the United States? How did your family decide to come to the United States?

**PL:** My parents decided to come to the United States when they came to visit in 1981, and, it was the first time that they came to the U.S. And it was the first time, I think, after the war that my mom visited her father who had come to the U.S., and my dad also was able to visit his sisters who were married to two men who came to the U.S.. And, so it was pretty much a trip about meeting family again. But, I guess as part of that process they were visiting the Hmong communities in the U.S. and they were very much impressed by the fact that unlike France, where the Hmong population was so small and people were living in a very scattered way in different cities, there were actually larger concentrations of Hmong population in the U.S.



Because it was a larger concentration, it seemed that in the U.S., there were Hmong communities that had been recreated, and I think that's what my parents really wanted when they came back. And they immediately decided that they wanted to apply for visas to immigrate to the United States. So, after 1981, it took about four years to get family visas, and also employment visas because my father was probably the first medical doctor in the Hmong community, so because of that special skill, he was requested by the University of Minnesota Southeast Asian Refugee Mental Health Refugee Program and, and was able to migrate based upon having special professional skills.

So, we came to the United States exactly on December 31, 1985, and I remembered that, I think we must have received the visas in, probably, in November, and less than a month later, we were in the United States. And that's kind of how much my parents wanted to come to the United States. And, so at the time I was 16 years old, and I was in my, almost my last year of what they called *lycee* which would be high school in France. And I remember not wanting very much to come to the United States at all, and thinking that, trying to think that, maybe it was only temporary, and maybe it was just a phase that my parents were going through, and so we would be going back to France, later on. So, that's kind of how we came to be in the United States.

In terms of adjusting to life in the United States, at the time I was 16 years old, so, of course, I was a little bit older, and I had studied English as—not so much as a second language, not in the sense that, people study English as a second language here, but rather because in Europe there are so many countries that, as part of the European system, there is a foreign language requirement in most countries. So by the time I was 16, I had actually had six years of British English as a foreign language. And so, at least, I had some basic language skills. Although, I do remember that coming to the United States, one of my main concerns, because my whole life was really about, has always been about school was, whether I could still do well in school.

And, so, what was hardest for me. It's just meant it was harder for me, but it was more like, my whole focus was on studying, and when I think back about my first six months in the United States, I can't remember anything because I think I was only studying, and I'm glad to say that, I guess I did well and after that I was, I mean, after six months, I knew that, I would be doing okay in the United States because I was doing okay in school. I think after that I could think more about learning more about the United States, and about the people.

**MH:** So since coming to the United States, what has been the easiest for you to adjust to?

**PL:** What has been the easiest has been, I don't think it has been really easy. I think it has been a progressive process, and I couldn't tell as the process was happening what was easiest, but looking back, I know that, what has made things easier, I guess, has actually been the fact that, there is a sense of mobility, in American culture and in American life. And because it is not only the sense, but it is a reality that things are moving very fast, and because of that, that sense of motion, I think people get used to changes, I guess, and, and so, being in a culture that is very much—that has change as one of its most basic

features, makes it—for me, it has made it easier to adjust, just because, there is the expectation that things are going to be different, and that they should be different, and there are those expectations that things are going to be different, and they're going to be better. So there's somewhat a sense of optimism or the sense that things are going to be happening, and I think for me that's what makes life interesting, and easier to adjust to in the U.S.

**MH:** So what would you say has been the hardest thing to adjust to about life in the United States? You talked a little bit about school, and the language piece.

**PL:** I think what has been difficult to adjust to—it has probably been both, I think the most challenging about coming to adulthood and the most interesting, which has been the whole issue of identity of course. But some of it, I think had to do with the timing of my coming to the United States also, because I came as an older teenager, and I basically came in to adulthood in the United States.

So the whole process of finding out who I was as a person happened at the same time as I was finding out what does it mean to be an American, or what does it mean to be a Hmong American, or what does it mean being an Asian American woman, and I think all of those things were somewhat challenging, but in the end, it has been much more richer because, having to resolve all of those issues, and having to kind of find some answers to a lot of questions about identity, culture, thinking about past and future. I think that everything has been connected together so that I guess, I would not be able to separate the experience of adjusting to the United States apart from the whole process of finding out who I am as a person, and growing up, and, finding out the way that I would want to live. So I'm ending up with, of course, the fact that I very much identify as a Hmong American, Asian American woman, etc...

**MH:** What were the immediate skills needed in your adjustment process?

**PL:** The most important skills that were needed were the desire and the ability to learn, and to be open to new things, and at the same time still have—I mean, I guess, it's fine to go, and you know, and learn new things all the time, but at the same time it's also important to have core values. And, so I'm kind of glad that, on the one hand I have always had a very strong desire and I have always ended up having the capacity to learn, and at the same time not losing some basic core values so that I would always be grounded. And, I think it's important to be able to have both at the same time so that there is motion and there is also some stability.

**MH:** How did you acquire those necessary skills?

**PL:** I think the desire and the capacity to learn—the only things that I can say about it, I think it's more inner, and it's not something that I have really developed. It's just something that I, when I think about it, I cannot imagine not asking questions and not wanting to know how things work, and not wanting to think about things, and it's just, I

mean, it's just beyond me—I mean to live and not think about things and not ask questions and not want to learn new things is not within my frame of mind, I guess.

On the other hand, I think that having core values—of course, it's not something that is innate, but it is somethings that people acquire, and I think that it was acquired because I had a family that, despite the fact that they were more progressive on many issues, at some level, there are some things that they were very traditional about, and I think that growing up I had very, very caring adults around me. They were young and they were educated, and they took the time to really take excellent care of their children. I think that makes a great difference in terms of how stable children are, and how stable they grow up to be.

**MH:** Were the skills that you have learned in France adaptable and usable in the United States?

**PL:** I think so. I think that the school system in France is really tough, and the basic learning skills that we get are very valuable, in terms of doing well in school. I realize that growing up in France, we were taught in more progressive and liberal kinds of political views of the world. Because of that, I can see how it has somewhat tainted some of my views, and I guess that's probably why I'm a more liberal person now.

**MH:** Overall, do you think life in the United States is better for Hmong women and why?

**PL:** My overall answer would be yes, life in the United States has been better for Hmong women. I think that there are things that were lost, that when you think about the things that were lost compared to the things that were gained, overall the gains have been greater than the losses, and I think that coming to the United States has, as many people have commented, it has basically forced the Hmong people to jump like three hundred years in the future in a very short amount of time.

So now Hmong women and girls have opportunities that they would never have dreamt of if, you know, if they were still in Laos. I think that, when you look at the fact that now women—although there are still problems—but now women have opportunities to get educated. Women have opportunities to be productive in different ways than they used to be. And Hmong women have an opportunity to have a value other than just being somebody's wife, somebody's mother or have an opportunity to be valuable for something more than being beautiful or being a good housewife or things like that. And, I think that makes a huge difference in terms of assessing whether it has been a good thing or bad thing.

**MH:** Do you feel that the United States is home?

**PL:** Yes, I do, of course, because I have never lived in Laos and Asia actually. And having gone back to France, I have realized that, I have very much identified with the United States, and with being American, and what, and then again the whole (once again it has to do with) the concept of what does it mean to be an American. I think especially

for me as an immigrant, as an immigrant in America, being American means having that diversity in my background and having a life story that is very rich and diverse as opposed to being more homogeneous and being grounded in only one culture or one country. So... I like the diversity and the openness and basically, the freedom of what it means to be an American because I see that as not meaning one thing, but it means that one can be many things. That's what it means to be an American.

**MH:** Are you a U.S. citizen?

**PL:** Yes, I am. I became a U.S. citizen in 1991, exactly five years after we came to U.S. yeah.

**MH:** Do you vote, and what do you think of the Hmong individuals who have sought public offices?

**PL:** When I was living in St. Paul—and I have lived in St. Paul for about thirteen years—it's only this year that I'm living not in St. Paul, but I am living in the suburbs. When I was living in St. Paul, I have always voted because I have always felt like—I guess when I was living in St. Paul, I was thinking, always feeling more like there were issues that were affecting the Hmong community that I wanted to be voting on.

But this year, in November, I happened to be living in the suburbs where there are basically no issues concerning the Hmong community, so I didn't even bother to go to the voting place. And what I'm kind of thinking about right now is, probably, I should be moving back to St. Paul, so it will help me to be better about voting also.

In terms of elected officials, I guess having been somewhat active politically—I guess, well, I feel ambivalent about public officials, because I do see how, yes they have—It is a sign of how well the Hmong community is doing if we are able to have community members being elected. But at the same time, I feel a little bit of disappointment about the fact that we have people who, I guess, who I would say are okay in office, but I also feel that there are many very good people who could be running, and for whatever reasons have not been running.

Because of that, I feel a little bit not very satisfied, I guess. And I wish that, and I don't think it's only in the Hmong community, but it's actually, a reality for the general political life in the United States, the fact that many of the elected officials are not the really good people. They are the people, they are the people who want to run and that's why they run and they get elected. Then the really good people who everyone would love to see run, actually are afraid of the political process and don't run, and don't get elected. And, I think that's a problem in terms of the quality of the elected officials. And of course the quality of government that we have.

**MH:** Let's talk about women's role outside of the home and public life. During the war did you know what was going on and how did you hear about it?

**PL:** Well, during the war, I did not know what was going on, and when I think back about it, I can see how—The reason why I didn't hear about it, was because at the time, I was a child, and my parents, and aunts and uncles were very good about protecting their children. They never talked to us about the sad things, and the bad things. So I can see how, I guess it is a credit to them that, they were very good about shielding their children about the fact that their lives were falling apart, and they were losing their country, and they were also losing relatives who had died during the war.

**MH:** Were there any public figures that you admired then, and who were they?

**PL:** Well, back then I was much too young, but, maybe I'll talk about some of the public figures that I have come to admire later on. I think that when we talk about public figures, I guess we were talking about public figures in the Hmong community. But it's interesting because, what I would talk about is—and people make it sound a little biased, but although most of what I have heard has always been positive. In my family, of course, the most important person in the family has been my grandfather who was patriarch of the family, but he was also a very respected leader in the Hmong community.

So what I have come to realize is that in my family, we have to, we tend to have a commitment and dedication to public service. And, I think that it mostly came from my grandfather whom I have never met, but despite the fact that I have never met him when he was alive, I can see how his legacy was so strong that even though he had been gone for a very long time. His spirit is somewhat carried over into his children and into his grandchildren, and it has to do with that concern with what is happening to our people. Which I think is really essential to wanting to do community service, to wanting to contribute to the public life and I can see that in myself, and can see that in some of our members of my family.

Then interestingly enough, I guess my other grandfather is also a public figure, and my other grandfather is General Vang Pao. And, what I would like to say about him is just that, as a child, not only as a child, but I guess as a member of the Hmong community, I know that there are very blaming feelings about him because, he has definitely been a very memorable leader of the Hmong community, and kind of an uncontested leader of the Hmong community.

Although some people see that as bad and some people see that as good. I think, as I'm getting a little bit older and I'm realizing more what his contribution has been to the Hmong community. I think that I'm slowly coming to the conclusion that despite the criticism and some of them may be legitimate, some of them may not be legitimate, is that, what is true, and what I guess no one could ever change is the fact that he has made a huge difference in the Hmong community.

To follow up on what I was talking about, kind of summarizing, is just that this—well despite some of the controversy that surrounds General Vang Pao, for example, I guess I'm coming to the conclusion that he has and he's playing a unique role in the Hmong community. And I think that when he's no longer here, I think many people will really

miss him, that they didn't know that they will be missing him, and I think it will really mark the passing of an era for the Hmong community.

So it's really once again, thinking in terms of the larger picture of Hmong history and what is Hmong history and what is the Hmong legacy. To say that, I'm not so sure that is so much to get admired leaders, but it's just that some of them just are, and, so that has to be acknowledged I guess.

**MH:** In America how do you think leadership has changed for you and other Hmong women?

**PL:** I think that, well, one of the things that has come to be appreciated has actually been the fact that we, young Hmong women, live at the time when we are so fortunate to have peers that, have gone through the same experience that we have gone through. We are part of a new generation that has been somewhat forced to take on a greater role in the Hmong community. And, because of what we are in terms of the different generations, I'm not sure if it's so much that we really—some of it is that we do want to play a significant role in the Hmong community, but it's also that we are part of a generation that really doesn't really have a choice about playing an important role for our community. Just because some of the older generation is no longer has the capacity of skills to do that and so their responsibilities have passed on to our generation.

And then the younger generation appears to have less of a sense of history and less sense of responsibility, and plus, they are younger, so, of course, I guess by default, these generations, my generation is also responsible for the younger generation. And that places this generation in a very unique position in terms of responsibilities and duties that have to be carried. What has been very positive is that we actually have many accomplished, bright and dedicated young women. And whether their leadership is being acknowledged or not, I think most people will be amazed at the amount of work that is being done by this generation of women.

**MH:** What type of things that women here doing publicly that they would not have been able to do in Laos or Thailand?

**PL:** Many things in terms of the kinds of jobs that they could be doing. The fact that they have jobs that are benefiting the community and then many of them have jobs that are not only benefiting the Hmong community but are also, now have slowly moved into the mainstream, and are actually making contributions to the mainstream community. The fact that Hmong women do feel more responsible and more able to contribute to their community and to the rest of the community. The fact that women have a better sense of how they want their lives to be and how they want their children's lives to be. And that I think makes a huge difference in terms of how women see the world and how they want to affect social change.

**MH:** What public contributions do you want people to remember about Hmong women?

**PL:** Well, I think that women are the backbone of society, and I think that that's true in the Hmong community too. Although some people may be in denial, but I think that in the Hmong community, people tend to look at, well, if an ancestor has been successful, or it's a family being successful and, many times, what has really made the difference is really because there was a good woman behind that man or there were many good women in that family that made the family successful.

I guess maybe right now it's early to talk about, like really huge public contributions that Hmong women have made, but at least they have always made significant and actually they're making the greatest contributions to the community through their—I guess despite everything Hmong women are very devoted to their families and so I think that does make a huge difference and as an extension they are devoted to their community. So, that also makes a difference.

Although, I think there are no what people would call outstanding public contributions right now, I think we should acknowledge some of the contributions that by, I guess, if you use mainstream standards, it may not be that huge but I think for all communities and for where we came from, it's pretty significant.

I think the fact that we actually have women organizations, whether informal and formal, that has been an accomplishment in itself. The fact that Hmong women have been able to find a space and find a voice for themselves has been significant. The fact that they are able to play a role in the public life, whether it's as a school board elected official or whether it's as a government appointee to direct the council, or like working for some states agencies, policy issues, or just working for the different community agencies. Although those are not huge public roles, they are still public roles that still have an impact on the Hmong community and on the mainstream community in general.

**MH:** Finally, is there anything that you would like to add that we haven't talk about?

**PL:** Well the only thing that I would say is that, I guess the reason, once again going back to why I was interested in being part of this project is because I wanted for this project to show the fact that despite everything, there is a little bit of diversity in the Hmong women's experiences, and I think that we do have women who were not born and raised in Laos.

So that's kind of what I was kind of looking at a little bit and, and the fact that we do have women, who have more than one or two cultures and traditions that they have to live with, and although I primarily am identified as Hmong American and Asian American now, I also know that, because I was born and raised in France, there are still some French imprints.

I think that as the Hmong people have resettled in different countries, and as the younger generations are growing up in different countries, the whole issue of what they call the Hmong does expand, and the fact that a lot of Hmong people in the future will have very diverse backgrounds. I think that's only a trend of this starting, and the whole issue of

what does it mean to be Hmong which many people are wondering about right now is going to be a very interesting question to explore.

**MH:** Thank you, that concludes our interview.

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