My Mother’s Perspective

My mother, Yian Saephanh, is a refugee from a country torn by war. Her life story as a young Mien girl to her painful journey to America is put in her perspective; I am merely here to tell her story and let others know what she and many others have been through that is not revealed in history books. My mother’s story of how she ultimately ended up in America is one that I find quite unique, while others, who have experienced or know someone who has experienced life as a refugee, may find it very common. Nonetheless, I feel that her story should be known in order to reveal the personal perspective of a Mien immigrant and her journey through life. For this assignment, I had to interview my mother through the phone. I had a pre-set list of questions to ask her, but I realized throughout the interview process that she was not as comfortable as I thought she would be. I realized that by asking her these questions, I was forcing her to relive those memories that she has tried so hard to forget. Not only was I opening up old wounds, I was scaring her as well by making her try to remember the past and the trauma she been through. I remember calling her back a day later to clarify a few questions and she snapped at me and told me to stop asking such specific questions before the U.S. government ships her back to Laos. It was then that I realized that I was making her relive the terror of war and bringing out the fear as well. Due to the Secret War, many Mien refugees fear the American government and I realized its impact, not only my mother, but many others as well. It is through my mother’s retelling about her experiences during the Secret War and a bit of research that I unravel the reasons behind the fear that many Mien immigrants have. With my mother’s past,
present, and future in mind, I explore her culture, life in Laos, the reasons behind her fear of the U.S. government, her journey to America, and her never-ending journey to find a place in American society as a minority by taking her story and incorporating it into the history of Southeast Asian refugees.

The Mien are a small sub-group of Southeast Asians, with the majority of the population living in Laos. Originally from southern China, the Mien left to neighboring countries in rebellion of the Chinese government centuries ago.¹ In Laos, the Mien lived in the high mountains and usually kept to themselves.² In the highlands, the Mien resided in twelve clans and in each clan there was a leader, who was more of a spokesman and dispute settler within each clan than an actual leader, and each clan’s name represented the last names of the people within them. My grandfather himself was the leader of the Saelee clan. Everyday the Mien wake up at the crack of dawn, have breakfast, walk hours in the jungle to go work in the fields, come back home at dusk, have dinner, and do the same thing over the next day. My mother’s story of being Mien is one that is a bit complicated. My mom is actually ethnically Cambodian and grew up culturally Mien. Her Cambodian father had a gambling addiction and sold my mother to a Mien man, my grandfather, who couldn’t have children with his wife. So as easy as that, my mother was taken away from her birth parents at the age of four and was brought to a whole new family and a whole new culture. My mother, whom my grandparents renamed Yian was the first of four children that they would adopt. My mother told me the meaning of her name in Mien literally means “to trade” because of how she was brought into the family. Initially scared when she first left with my grandfather, she easily adjusted and learned the Mien language within a few months and wasn’t alone when my grandparents adopted more children into the family. As the eldest daughter, my mother was expected to do many things such as cook, clean, and work in
the fields. Thus began my mother’s new life as a dutiful Mien daughter.

As a child and the eldest daughter, my mother had many responsibilities. When her parents went to work in the fields, she would clean the house, take care of the animals, and prepare a meal for her parents by the time they came home. As Ying and Chao explained, the ordinary Mien child would watch over their younger siblings, do the sewing, and even work in the fields. As an adult, my grandfather had an arranged marriage for my mother. I asked my mother how she felt at the time of her arranged marriage and her only response was that her parents urged her to get married and live with them to take care of them. “My parents didn’t have children to look after them so they urged me, as the eldest, to marry and live with them. So they found a husband for me to make sure I stayed home.” As an old cultural tradition, many Mien children are expected to live and care for their parents as adults. In a traditional Mien family, the children were expected to help their parents with whatever they asked, cook every meal, clean the house, and most important of all, show respect at all times. Hence, my mother was quickly married and was expected to care for her parents and husband. It wasn’t until seven children and thirteen years later that my mother separated from her husband in the United States. In the United States, her responsibilities remained the same toward her parents. Although living in different households, my mother had to make sure my grandparents had a roof over their head, were financially stable living on their own, and quickly assisted them whenever they called.

In the midst of the Vietnam War, the Second Geneva Conference of 1962 guaranteed that Laos remained neutral, but the United States violated the agreement. Known as “America’s Secret Army,” the Mien and the Hmong people were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to fight guerrilla style against the communists in Laos. As Mien men risked their lives fighting on their own land for the politically powerful United States, the United States
continued to drop millions of bombs onto the once beautiful land in an attempt to destroy the Ho Chi Minh trail that was allowing the North Vietnamese to supply their communist troops in South Vietnam. As the American troops began to withdraw from Vietnam after the cease-fire agreement in 1973, the communist took over Laos in 1975. Under President Ford’s “parole,” South Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees entered the United States, but because the war in Laos was not considered as dangerous, those in Laos remained defenseless to fend for themselves. After the withdrawal of American troops from Laos, the Mien and Hmong people were targeted by the communist Pathet Lao for helping the Americans. My mother described her experience of the day her village was raided by the Pathet Lao and her journey to Thailand:

“I was pregnant at the time with my fourth child. My parents somehow heard through other villagers that the Pathet Lao were coming, so we had already left into the wilderness of the deep jungles. I hid my children under the green banana leaves because the Pathet Lao would shoot at the greenish yellow banana leaves thinking there were people under there. I, along with my husband, and a few other villagers returned home to grab as much food as possible for our long journey. All I remember were the gun shots going through our roofs. I don’t know why, but I thought about bringing one of the pigs with us so I grabbed a stick and began beating the pig to go as I was running. Little did I know, out of fright, I had beaten the pig so hard that it actually became bruised and died. My husband and I got extremely lucky when we were stopped by a militia man. He held a gun to my husband, but luckily another militia man saw that I was pregnant and intervened. He spoke in Laos saying that my husband and I were not part of it and they let us go. I didn’t know to be relieved or shocked, but my husband and I got up and ran through the jungles. We had nowhere to go and the only place we knew of was Thailand.
So with the rest of the villagers, my family and I began our fourteen day journey walk to Thailand. There were people who had actually went to Thailand before, so we hired them and as a village, we all followed, trusting that we would be in Thailand soon. There were days where we couldn’t see a thing because it was so dark. All we had were some flashlights, carrying our children on our backs and whatever food we had, hoping that we would get there soon.”

Knowing my mother’s struggle to get to Thailand, I understand her hesitation during our interview and the pain I was making her remember. Due to my mother’s experience of escape, she views the American government at fault for tearing apart her home country and harbors a fear that the United States is powerful enough to do it again. It is because of experiences like my mother’s that other Mien refugees have a sense of fear toward the American government.

In 1980 my mother and her family arrived to the Phanat Nikhom Refugee Camp. In Thailand, my mother gave birth to her fourth child, my brother. Two years later, while still in the refugee camp, my mother gave birth to another child, my sister. When I asked my mother about her life in the refugee camp in Thailand, she was very vague about it. It was as if she didn’t want to talk about it. She described only the good aspects, such as the camp being big and clean with a lot of food for everyone. “The Americans fed us really well.” But as Holly Ann Williams explains, refugee camp life was the complete opposite as what my mother described. There were scarce resources, limited food, diseases, and overcrowding of other refugee families. I wondered as to why my mother had covered up the truth. While I was interviewing my mother about her life in the refugee camps, she was brief and abrupt with her responses. Maybe it was because she didn’t want to relive those memories, or maybe it was because she didn’t want me to know what she been through. Nonetheless, I respected her decision to not tell me the whole
story. It wasn’t until late 1982 when my mother and her family were processed and had all their shots taken at the Bangkok General Hospital that they were allowed to go to the United States.

My mother and her family came into the United States under the Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement Program. On her plane ride to the United States, my mother put her trust into the American government, hoping that things would be better than they were before. In her interview, she described her experience on the plane and her introduction to American food. “I ate bread. They fed us well. There was no rice. There was a beautiful red apple that I had never seen before because in Laos, there weren’t such things as apples. I didn’t know how to eat it, but when I bit into it, it was really juicy.”

When my mother and her family landed on American soil, they were in Tennessee. When they arrived, Laotian translators helped them communicate with their sponsor. Once in the United States, as Chan writes, one of the nine voluntary agencies, known as the volags whom were contracted with the federal government, would help to resettle Southeast Asian refugees. One of those volags that helped sponsor my family was the United States Catholic Conference. Through sponsorship, my family received help such as enrolling the children into schools and having a place to live. In 1983, my family uprooted again and moved to California. As Chan discusses in her book, many Southeast Asian moved to California because of the warm climate and the generous public assistance programs. But for my mother, it wasn’t because of the warm climate at all. “All our families and people from our village who came before us were all in California, so it made sense for us to move to California for familial support.”

For the Mien, family is vital and it “encompasses all blood relatives and in-laws.” Coming to America, my mother wanted nothing more than to have a similar life to what she had in her home country. Being around family and familiar faces was how my mother created a sense of community in America. By being around those who shared the same experiences, my mother
was able to connect with others because they all understood the hardships they all went through to get to America. And while in America, my mother received help from relatives who had already been in California and knew English as well. It is in California that my mother began her life with her children in the hopes of finding a safer place, but even as she hoped things would be better, the hard part was not quite over.

In the United States, Americans were hostile toward Southeast Asian refugees because they were seen as inferior and were attacked emotionally and physically. As Nicassio said, “the self-esteem of many refugees has suffered in the face of significant status loss, underemployment, and perceived rejections by Americans.”17 In America, as told by Nicassio, “governmental and public attitudes toward their immigration have not been uniformly favorable and, instead have been punctuated by instances of indifference and hostility.”18 My mother, having hope in her heart, came to America thinking that things would be better than how they were in her home country. Yet, as Yen Le Espiritu writes, “a 1980 poll of American attitudes in nine cities revealed that nearly half of those surveyed believed that the Southeast Asian refugees should have settled in other Asian countries” and that “refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in many parts of the United States have been attacked and even killed; and their properties have been vandalized, firebombed, or burned.”19 My family relied on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and welfare. Hence, many saw my family and other Southeast Asian refugees as leeches on the American public assistance programs. People did not understand the extent of what my family and other refugees had went through. My family did not want to come to America. They never asked to leave their home in the mountains of Laos. Instead, they were forced to flee in order to survive because their home was destroyed from a war they had no say in. As Nicassio emphasized, “from the departure from Southeast Asia, through the transitional
camp period, and up to the point of resettlement, the refugees have found themselves in a position in which they have had to surrender significant control over their daily lives and future to other more powerful individuals and bureaucracies.” Mien refugees in the United States rely on the very Americans who once left them to face the communist Pathet Lao, so it is understandable that most Mien have a hint of distrust and fear toward the American government. What my mother and other refugees have suffered both in their home country and in the United States is where the fear of the American government stems from. Being torn away from their homeland due to an unwanted war, having to flee to Thailand from the Pathet Lao after the American troops left, living under the harsh conditions in the refugee camps, coming into the United States hoping for the best, but receiving rejection and hostility from the American citizens, and losing their traditional roots are all events that have created a sense of fear that my mother and many other Mien refugees have toward the American government.

Besides the hostility, my mother had other problems being in America such as rebuilding a new life in a new foreign country. After all that she had been through in Laos due to her hard labor in the fields and her long journey to Thailand, my mother became disabled and unable to work. Despite all this, she raised her eight children by herself. “It’s hard being in America. I and many others can’t do any of the American jobs because we can’t speak English. I’m old now and I still don’t know the language. It’s hard. Laos was hard, but at least I knew the language and I could work in the fields. It’s hard being here and relying on SSI, but I keep telling myself my children are better off so therefore I’ll be better off as well.” As my mother told me stories of Laos and how easy things were there, I thought to myself, how much happier she would be if she were in Laos. “Sometimes I think about Laos. We made our own food and minded our own business. There were no gangs to be afraid of. A person can walk by themselves at night and not
have to worry.” So I asked her if she had the chance, would she like to go back to Laos. And her response was simple: no. She told me that she wouldn’t want to go back to Laos because all her relatives are in America now. Her children are in America. There’s nothing to go back to and the plus side of being in America are the electronics and easy access to supplies such as medicine and food.

My mother’s journey to America is one that is quite familiar to other Southeast Asian refugees. She came with her family to escape war. Although she didn’t want to leave her homeland, she decided to leave to find a better place for her children. She, like many others, faced and continues to face hostilities and hardships in America. But she still continues to fight to create a home for her family. Even though she has faced obstacles in America, she continues to encourage me to get an education and live a better life than she has. She believes in me to go out there and let my voice be heard instead of being silent. Through her story and through what she has endured, I am inspired to never give up even though there have been many times when I questioned why I am here at UCLA. The obstacles my mother faced amazes me because it shows how strong she is to be here today. Due to my mother’s perspective, I am more appreciative of my culture, my family, and the history of how Mien refugees came to America.

1Charles C. Irby and Ernest M. Pon, “Confronting New Mountains: Mental Health Problems among Male Hmong and Mien Refugees” (110)

2Yu-Wen Ying and Chua Chiem Chao, “Intergenerational Relationship in Iu Mien American Families” (48)

3Yu-Wen Ying and Chua Chiem Chao, “Intergenerational Relationship in Iu Mien American Families” (55)

4Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.

5Yu-Wen Ying and Chua Chiem Chao, “Intergenerational Relationship in Iu Mien American Families” (57)

6Charles C. Irby and Ernest M. Pon, “Confronting New Mountains: Mental Health Problems among Male Hmong and Mien Refugees” (110)


9 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.

10 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.

11 Holly Ann Williams, “Families in Refugee Camps” (102)

12 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.


15 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.

16 Yu-Wen Ying and Chua Chiem Chao, “Intergenerational Relationship in Iu Mien American Families”


21 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.

22 Yian Saephanh, Kassy Saeppunh, Telephone Interview, January 28, 2011.
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