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## Interview with Xai Thao

Mai Neng Vang  
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# Xai Thao

**Interviewer: Mai Neng Vang (daughter)**  
**Translator/Transcriber: Peter Chou Vang**  
**Editor: Paul Hillmer**

**(0:18) Tell us a little about your life.**

I was born and raised in (Northern) Laos. I grew up without any formal education. We farm most of my childhood, helping our parents. My parents provided us with everything. I helped to baby sit my younger siblings and to look after the house. I learned how to take care of the livestock on the farm. I learned how to cook and prepared food for my parents while they are out in the garden. Laos was and still is a very backward country.

**(2:09) What are the traditional roles of the Hmong family in Laos?**

My parents would both tend to the farm. When we became older, we all helped at the farm. What little income my parents earned, they would use to buy yarns to make clothing for us children. There was no way to make money in Laos. Only when my parents sold their vegetables at the open markets did we make some money. In the house, it is still the parents' job to teach us what to do. This was life for us back in Laos. Early every morning (around 4-5:00 am), we were awakened by our parents to prepare breakfast and food for the day. The girls' chores were carrying water from the well and to pound rice in the stone mortar. My brothers would go pick some fresh green vegetables for us to cook and to feed the livestock. They also brought in the timbers to make the morning fire. This is what we were taught. We all have our own roles, but many times we overlapped so that everybody would get done on time.

**(6:26) Can you tell us what an average day was like for you like back in Laos?**

Inside the house, preparing food was the biggest task. We would pound the rice into the stone mortar and grind it before cooking. We steamed the rice and cooked the side dishes for breakfast and also to prepared some for lunch every morning. Outside of the house, working on the rice and vegetable field was the norm. When we had extra time, we cleaned the house and washed our cloths. Our parents expected us to accomplish these types of chores every day.

**(8:58) Can you tell me about the traditional clothing and special events that the Hmong has in Laos?**

In Laos, there was little free time. Only after the harvest season was over were we able to celebrate "Nau Paichow." This is our New Year celebration. This is the only time when we were given new sets of clothes to wear. We were discouraged from working. The youth were encouraged to come together to have fun and to find suitable spouses. The New Year would usually last four to five days. After this event, it was back to the farm. Since I was a White Hmong [Different types of Hmong due to Chinese segregation in the past] I could wear whatever type of White Hmong costumes I chose. There are some that wanted to wear the traditional female White Hmong pants instead of the skirt. For the men, they sometimes wore the traditional costume that included the cap. Even if our clothes were new they were not beautiful or decorative because we lacked the materials and time to do this.

**(12:33) What other events did you do throughout the year?**

After the New Year there was enough time to do some stitch work and to write or sing songs that could be performed for the next coming New Year celebration. Sometimes the men would attend cockfights, water buffalo fights, bull fights and the traditional game of tops [During and shortly after the New Year]. There were lots of traditional instruments that were played during this time. All these excitements did not make us want to go back into the daily boring routine at the farm.

**(15:14) What was traditional courtship and marriage like?**

In the old days, you did not tell each other orally that you liked them, but used the traditional pipe instrument and other means to tell them. The passions in the tunes of the instruments expressed feelings that no words could express. These tunes would tell how much you loved someone and that you wanted to marry them. We were too embarrassed to talk openly to someone that we were attracted to, not like you youth these days. We did not date; there was only courtship. The man would never enter our house. At midnight, the man that likes you will come like a thief to talk to you (the thin bamboo walls makes this possible). When both are ready for marriage and are in love, the groom's family would bring some rice wine over and would try to offer a dowry for the girl's marriage. Sometimes the groom would come and "kidnap" the bride. In Laos, the dowry is to compensate for the loss of a valuable worker in the bride's family. The dowry would be about 600 American dollars. Sometimes the bride's parents will give marriage presents that will be as valuable and as expensive as 600 dollars. In Laos, the marriage age usually was around 16 years old. If you were younger than this, the in-laws considered that you were still too young to do work. It is by tradition that the new bride cannot work for three full days when she first enters into the groom's house. It was taboo to work. The in-laws would go kill some chicken or a pig to offer to their ancestors so that the bride will be accepted into her new clan family. The groom is expected to work and help out at the in-law's house and farm as much as he works on his or his parent's farm. The newly wedded are to call their in-laws "mother" and "father." It is an unspoken law and tradition that the bride must put her new family before herself no matter the circumstances. She must cook and look after the well being of her husband's family.

**(22:32) Can you tell me about your marriage experience?**

My husband was the youngest on in his family. He was 18 years old when we were married. I was 16 years old. We had 2 children. Unfortunately, in 1975 the Vietnamese killed him along with one of my children and my father-in-law when we tried to cross the Mekong River. We ran back to Laos after this tragic event. We hid in the forest for many days, living on roots and wild plants. Due to malnutrition, my other child died. Only my mother-in-law and I survived. We were all starving at this time. (26:10)

**(26:11) Can you tell me about the war?**

The Vietnamese came and took over our villages. They tried to kill all our men [during 1975 when the US pulled out of South East Asia]. The Vietnamese chased us everywhere. My husband was in front of me when he was shot and killed. Luckily for us women, we were behind the men and when we heard the gunshots we fled into the jungle. I saw both my husband and my father-in-law falling in front of me. I saw the muzzle flashes of the Vietnamese guns. After running and hiding we finally regrouped; some were missing or killed. It was a scary time. Even now when I think back, it just seems like yesterday. (29:36)

**(29:37) Why did the Hmong help the Americans during the war?**

The Americans came and also help us out. The Americans came and asked us to help fight the war, so we did. We did not like the Vietnamese. We were a poor people and we realized that the Americans were strong and rich and were willing to help those in need.

**(31:31) How do you feel about the Vietnamese treatment of the Hmong?**

The Vietnamese want us all to work together (Communist doctrine). However, the Vietnamese would take away all that we have worked hard for. Those who opposed their ways were quickly killed. Even if you wear a new outfit, the Vietnamese would question you about where you got the money to buy it or who gave it to you. If you made some profit from business, they would ask you how you made such profit. They will take you and interrogate you. The Vietnamese hated us if we had a bit more than they did. None of us Hmong liked their ways. (33:15)

**(33:16) What did you do after your first husband was killed?**

After my husband, children and my father-in-law were killed, we hid in the forest for many days. My mother and siblings were already in Thailand. My remaining in-laws did not want to bring me across the Mekong River [Crossing the Mekong cost too much for the in-laws and also her ties to her in-laws were lessened by the death of her father-in-law, husband and children.] They allowed me to marry to get rid of me. My new husband took me over to Thailand [her current husband today]. Both of us had nothing except for each other. We both built a bamboo raft on the Mekong River and drifted to the Thai side. We both had nothing except for the clothing we wore. The Thai found us and gave us some warm cloths and some food to eat. They send us to Vinai. We were very poor and lived in Vinai for 3 years. That was when we decided to come over to America.

**(36:13) When you crossed the Mekong River with your husband, did you have a designated area where you two were planning to land?**

We both realized that if we could not make it then we might as well die crossing. We had nothing to lose so we both decided to cross without know what was on the other side. We did not know if the Thais would accept us or not. All we knew was that the Vietnamese would kill us if we went back. We did not even care if the Thais were going to kill us, just as long as we got away from Laos.

**(38:22) Did you lose other family members to the Vietnamese?**

No one was lost when we crossed the Mekong River.

**(39:02)What was life like in the refugee camps? What were your worries? Were you able to contact any of our family members once in the refugee camps?**

The Thais designated a place for us Hmong to stay. The refugee camp was called Vinai. I saw many of my relatives there who had not come over to America yet. It lightened my heart to see familiar faces.

**(40:39) In Thailand, could the Hmong perform the same type of activities and events as back in Laos?**

In Thailand, many things were different. We were like caged animals. We could not farm and we had to buy everything. We were never used to money, so it was a new thing for us. We were not allowed to move outside of the refugee camp. If we went outside of the camp to pick up firewood or search for something to eat, we were beaten. Thailand was a little better than Laos, at least we did not have to live and hide in the forest fearing for our lives. Even the New Year Celebration there was not a joyous event. Only the youth found it fun to go looking for friends and spouses. There was nowhere to go. Everything cost money in Thailand.

**(42:56) Overall, what is your impression about the Thais?**

There are some good and bad Thais. When we crossed the Mekong, they made sure that we were all right. Once in the refugee camp, if you stay put and did not move around, then the Thais would not bother you. If you tried to move outside of the camp for anything then they would beat you. If you had money then the Thais would treat you better. I was content because they did not kill us.

**(44:23) Did you live anywhere beside the Vinai refugee camp?**

We have not gone to any other camps.

**(44:46) Did the war change the Hmong in many ways?**

I believe that the Hmong culture changed in many ways. We became more appreciative of life no matter where we lived. (End of track 1 at 45:42 and continue on track 2)

I was glad and lucky to arrive in Thailand. The Thai's cruelty was nothing compared to what we experienced in Laos.

**(0:55) Tell us how you come to America.**

We were very poor and the Americans allowed us to come over because we helped them in the war. We had nowhere else to go. When we registered to come over to America, we were lucky and allowed to come over. Here in America, no matter who you are, you are accepted. I do not remember when we came over. We swore that we would accept American laws and regulations. One of these laws and regulations was to discontinue polygamy. We had to swear to uphold these laws and regulations before the Americans allowed us to come over.

**(5:30) When you came over the America, were you worried about anything?**

Before we came over to America, my mother and all my brothers came over to America already. I wanted to come over and be with my family. My husband's family was still all in Laos. He was more reluctant to come over but he would never go back to Laos. My husband was the only one in his family to come to America. Once on the plane, we did not know what to do. It was like entering a huge house and you just come out to America on the other side [riding on the jet].

**(8:36) How long have you been in the United States? Was it by choice for you to stay in Minnesota?**

We were allowed to decide where to go. We had relatives who lived here so we decided to stay here in Minnesota. We arrived here in February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1985. We never moved out of here. It is a free land and there were no worries so I am happy to be here.

**(9:47) What were the culture shocks once you landed in Minnesota? What was your first impression of the many ethnic groups that lived here?**

We never saw snow in Laos; except for occasion hail storms. Here in Minnesota, when it snows, it snows. We believe that since others can survive, so can we. The diverse ethnic groups help enforce our belief that America is a land that is willing to accept all nations and races. The biggest difference was the way we cook. Cooking in America is very convenient; you do not have to go out and find firewood like in Laos. America is a modernized country.

**(12:39) Can you tell me about finding work when you first come here? Did your sons help provide some income for you and your husband?**

Our sponsor helped us apply for welfare and the necessary things that we need. Our sponsor showed us around and made sure that we were ok.

**(13:53) Did you or your husband pursue an education once you were here? (14:06)**

We were too old to learn but we did attend some schooling to learn the English language. We decided to learn the language because we wanted to know how to go about without asking for assistance.

**(14:53) Did the Hmong culture and tradition change compared to back in Laos?**

In America, most people go to church. All the buildings are clean and are well taken care off. We cannot perform our old religious ceremonies inside the house anymore. The Americans knew about our ways and they found places for us to buy animals for our religious ceremonies. Overall, the Americans were very considerate. They would not allow us to perform our religious ceremonies in the house but we were provided with a place to perform them.

**(16:36) What was the hardest experience for you in America?**

The hardest would have to be that the older generation like us who have no educational background and are not familiar with the language. It is very hard. If we could read and write and know the language then everything would have been better.

**(17:26) What was the best experience of you in America?**

The best thing was that the Americans were willing to help us in many ways. They allowed us to go back to school and make sure that we did not starve. We were all treated equally.

**(17:59) Did your sponsor's kindness change the way you view other people who are not Hmong?**

They helped our family and gave us a peace of mind. My children were able to attend school. Back in Laos, this would never have happened. My children went to school at age five and now they are educated. Life will only get better from here on.

**(19:11) Have you ever considered going back to Laos?**

I only want to go to visit and see the country. I would never want to go and live there anymore. America is a land of freedom and Laos is an oppressive country. I only want to go back to visit family members. Besides, none of the younger generation want to go back.

**(20:43) Do you have any words to say to the younger Hmong generation that will listen to your word someday?**

First of all, I would like to say that all you who grew up here in America are very lucky. You all were born in a country that is free for you to do everything. You all must listen to us so that your lives will not be tragic like ours. Someday when you are well off, help other people just like the Americans helped us. You all must become model citizens and help others in need. This is all I have to say