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Running head: HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Hmong in the Twin Cities: Diaspora Experiences and Personal Identities

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....4

Abstract5

Chapter 1. Introduction6

 1. Asian Diaspora Framework11

 2. Methodology14

 a. Research Context18

 b. Researcher’s Positionality18

 3. Background and Literature Review19

 a. Double Diaspora19

 b. Participation in the Vietnam War23

 c. Migration to the United States as Refugees24

Chapter 2: Influence of History on Diaspora Experiences and Personal Identities.....28

 1. Relationship with History of War29

 a. Approaches to Discussions of War29

 b. Critiques of Common War Narratives35

 c. Intergenerational Trauma39

 2. Ongoing Impact of Hmong American Refugee Experience42

 3. Narratives of ‘Knowing’ History46

 4. Documenting Stories48

 5. Conclusion49

Chapter 3: Urban Lived Experiences and Identities51

 1. Twin Cities Decision-Makers and Leaders52

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

2. Twin Cities Daily Life and Identity55

 a. Privilege and Holding Power55

 b. Stereotypes and Expectations57

 c. Sense of Belonging59

 d. Intergenerational Conflict, Assimilation, and Identity62

3. Conclusion65

Chapter 4: Relationship Between Twin Cities Hmong Networks and Identity66

 1. Hmong American Networks in the United States67

 2. Twin Cities Hmong Networks70

 3. Twin Cities Hmong Community’s Relationship with Other Ethnic Groups74

 4. Conclusion76

Chapter 5: Conclusion78

 1. History and Identity78

 2. Lived Experiences and Identity81

 3. Networks and Identity84

 4. Limitations and Current Relevance86

References90

Appendix96

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Abstract:

Asian Americans as a whole have been portrayed as “model minorities” due to their higher degree of socioeconomic success compared to the average population. However, this “model minority” stereotype primarily based upon the voluntary immigration experiences of East and South Asians with greater socio-economic resources, hardly accounts for the immigration experiences of other Asian groups such as Hmong Americans. Utilizing extensive literature review, first person interviews and collected survey data, this paper explores Hmong diaspora and identity in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, analyzing how Hmong Americans reconcile with the stereotypes set for Asian “model minorities” and construct their own unique identities. Through adopting the “Asian diaspora” perspective, this paper examines the ways Hmong Americans in the Twin Cities area create their personal identities through various connections to the history and memory of war, the refugee experience of moving across spaces, family networks and relations, as well as the localized experience of urban livelihoods. Due to the Twin Cities Hmong community’s large size and diversity -- standing as one of the primary Hmong hubs in the U.S. and home to various Hmong social, cultural, and political organizations -- studying this community helps contribute a more nuanced understanding of the multitude of Hmong American urban identities.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Encompassing both Minneapolis and Saint Paul, the Twin Cities are home to the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the United States and provide a unique geographic location to study the social construction of Hmong identity in the United States. As an Asian ethnic group, Hmong populations in America have been heavily influenced by the circumstances under which the diaspora was created. Notably, the majority of Hmong in the United States arrived as refugees from Southeast Asia. During the Vietnam War from 1962-1975, Hmong in Laos were recruited by the United States to fight against communism. Initially kept a secret from the U.S. public, this Hmong involvement during the Vietnam War is now sometimes known as the Secret War of Laos. Later, when the United States withdrew from the region, Hmong people were provided with little support and were forced to leave Laos to escape persecution by the Pathet Lao. As political refugees, Hmong moved across several Southeast Asian countries, and many eventually settled in the United States with notable hubs in California, Minnesota and Wisconsin. Additionally, after being initially resettled in the United States, as financial circumstances allowed, many Hmong participated in secondary migration processes and moved a second time within the U.S. to be closer to family and community members. Despite this, even before the Secret War of Laos and the forced exodus of Hmong people from Laos by the Pathet Lao, Hmong have been considered a diasporic people due to having to flee China in the mid-1700s to mid-1800s as refugees (Hein, 2013).

For a population with a long history of migration, identity is a crucial component to analyze in order to understand the lived experiences of Hmong Americans today. This

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

is due to how identities are complicated by ‘homeland’ experiences and memory, as well as the way identities can hold communities together. For example, different Hmong individuals have varying understandings and perspectives on what their ancestral homeland entails due to their different experiences. Additionally, experiences living in the United States have shaped both the Hmong American populations individual and collective identities. Second generation migrants in particular must experience and navigate the tensions and exclusions due to the intersectionality of transnationalism, assimilation, diaspora, and the racialization of their lives (Brocket, 2018).

In this way, identity is a difficult concept to pin down, and becomes more difficult and nuanced when the social construction of it is studied within *diasporas* where notions of belonging, homeland, and culture are complicated as it is for Hmong in the Twin Cities. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, identity can be defined as “the distinguishing character or personality of an individual.” In this manner, identity, as traditionally defined, focuses on a person’s individuality -- specifically what makes an individual *different* from others. Thus, understanding the spaces of difference between individuals often becomes synonymous with identity. However, this common and traditional definition of identity is oversimplified. Although identity is a topic of frequent casual conversation, it, as both a concept and a phenomenon, is extremely complex and often very subjective to the individual it pertains to.

Essentially, one’s identity is not a set of easily selected categories. Instead, identity is derived from negotiation and dialogue across multiple and often opposing categories and identities. For Hmong in the Twin Cities, some examples of identities one might need to negotiate include: Asian American, Hmong American, female, second

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

generation immigrant etc. Here, identity is influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, bloodline, and physical appearance, but it is also something that can be cultivated and learned at different points in time. Identities are further complicated because they are simultaneously influenced by one's self-perception, as well as by societal expectations and stereotypes imposed on individuals and groups (Kibria, 2002). For example, people must navigate through differences between local, regional and national forms of identity. Identity is also a complex concept due to the variability in language used to describe it. Often, terms of identification (e.g., Asian or Hmong) take on their own meanings which are constantly being re-negotiated and understood (Kibria, 2002). For my research on identity, I am particularly interested in processes of identity negotiation. Identity negotiation refers to how people navigate various conflicting identities in order to understand themselves, and this negotiation of identity is heavily grounded and influenced by where people currently live and where they have historically lived.

In our increasingly globalized world, conceptions of identity have had to deal with heightened cross-border perspectives and interactions -- specifically, ensuring that discussions of identity include an analysis on the dynamics between diasporas, host societies and 'homelands.' Looking at the dynamics between these different aspects shows recognition of how locations (both physical and imagined) can mean different things to different people (Brocket, 2018). For example, people with the same ethnic background may identify different countries as their homeland due to *their own* lived experiences. Moreover, with the categories that form related to identity (e.g., Asian American, first generation immigrant), people often create related in-group versus out-group distinctions between such categories and identities (Hooghe, 2020).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

It is key to note that a distinction can be drawn between collective identity and individual identity. Collective identity refers to the “shared sense of belonging to a group,” whereas individual identity, as implied, focuses on an individual's specific values, characteristics, beliefs and backgrounds. Although collective identity and individual identity are often discussed as two separate phenomena, they are not mutually exclusive. Instead, collective identity and individual identity frequently interact with and influence each other. For example, an individual’s membership as a part of a collective identity influences their own personal identity, and those who identify as part of a shared group identity, often have differing views and perspectives from their fellow members -- although the degree of difference differs. Understanding individual identities within the context of collective identities matters in geographic research because it acknowledges differences rather than homogenizing experiences. Additionally, individual’s identities are shaped by the communities around them and the collective identities they come in contact with. In this way, place and location matter because they help explain connections between communities.

In this vein, researching and exploring the Twin Cities Hmong population’s identity construction and diaspora experiences will contribute to nuanced knowledge creation regarding these concepts. Studying identity for Hmong in the Twin Cities centers and prioritizes Hmong lives and experiences. Since identity involves both collective and individual narratives, how identity is negotiated reflects minority groups’ position in a social hierarchy, thus, providing deeper insight and understanding into how minority groups are treated. In this way, identity becomes a portal through which we can understand how minority groups operate among other similar immigrant or minority

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

groups, while also illustrating how minority groups operate in the context of dominant society.

With this context, my research aims to **explore the social construction of Hmong Americans' personal and collective identities in the Twin Cities area**. Thus, this project specifically asks:

1. How have the lived experience and identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities been influenced by their war, migration, and refugee memory and experiences?
2. What are the lived experiences like for Hmong living in the Twin Cities? How do their living experiences shape/connect to their collective and personal identities?
3. How are the personal identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities influenced by various connections and networks through families, kinship, clans and Hmong inside and outside the Twin Cities area?

In other words, in this thesis, I explore the social construction of Twin Cities Hmong identity through first analyzing the ways in which the larger, collective Hmong American identity has been influenced by the history and memory of war, migration, and refugee experiences. I note that this exploration is not solely focused on people with first-hand experience of historic events, for example those who directly participated in the Secret War of Laos. Instead, I also look into the indirect and intergenerational impacts of this history and shared memory on Hmong in the Twin Cities. Next, I explore the different lived experiences for Hmong in the Twin Cities -- attempting to determine the different ways Twin Cities Hmong residents experience the Twin Cities and interact with their 'Hmongness' as it relates to their individual identities. Lastly, I analyze how individual Twin Cities Hmong identities have been influenced and continue to be influenced by

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

networks both in and out of the Twin Cities. These networks I am studying include both relationships with other Hmong groups, as well as relationships with non-Hmong minority groups. Some of these potential networks explored include kin and family networks, clan networks, technology and social media, and political leadership. Since this research focuses on identity, it aims to highlight and prioritize personal accounts and knowledge. Thus, in this reach, I emphasize people's actual direct experiences and perspectives, and supplement this with previously established research on Hmong communities. My research on Twin Cities Hmong identity is broken down into three thematic chapters based on the three research questions listed above.

Asian Diaspora Framework:

To better situate my research, I deploy an 'Asian diaspora' perspective to guide it. Since the end of the 20th century, research on diaspora processes has increased -- allowing more exploration on what this concept looks like and its significance. Most diaspora research tends to be grounded in specific geographic locations or with specific groups. However, the application of the term 'diaspora' varies greatly from more generalized understandings of the 'Asian diaspora' or 'Southeast Asian diaspora,' to more localized focuses such as on a country or ethnic group. For this research, I investigated what 'Asian diaspora' is conceptually and how this framework connects to 'Hmong diaspora' specifically.

Since the meaning and usage of the term 'diaspora' has changed overtime, generally, 'diaspora' is a term used in scholarship to discuss "a number of different kinds of movement and situations of mobility among human populations" (Edwards, 2014). At

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

the same time, there are certain characteristics a diaspora should contain including: (1) the forced migration of a group of people, (2) a collective memory of the 'homeland', (3) maintenance of a group identity regardless of geographic location/physical environment, and (4) networks to the homeland. In American studies and cultural studies specifically, diaspora research is used to highlight how the notion of 'belonging' is complex and multifaceted. And as Stuart Hall (1990) describes, belonging is "not an essence but a positioning" (as cited in Edwards, 2014).

More precisely, 'Asian diaspora' refers to the phenomena where people with similar Asian cultural heritage and/or motherland disperse to different locations from their original homeland. This perspective emphasizes complicated issues of belonging, family and kinship networks, the transient nature of the "homeland," and the intersectionality of different aspects of a person's identity (Edwards, 2014). Diasporas can also be understood as operating along a space of 'difference' since it brings together people who are similar in their shared claimed difference (whether that difference be ethnicity, nationality, religion, language, ideology, memory, history, etc.). Theoretically, diasporas are also known as involving dispersal across space over time (Chowdhury and Akenson, 2016), which is particularly relevant to the Hmong population's experience.

Noting the Hmong population's history of persecution, as well as secondary migration processes within the U.S., this Asian diaspora framework is important because it recognizes that although often geographic in nature, diasporas are more complex and flexible than solely looking at one's geographic 'homeland' (Chowdhury and Akenson, 2016). For example, people may feel differently about their 'homeland' depending on the circumstances with which they left it (whether that be for economic opportunities or

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

because they were being persecuted) and based on their personal experiences having actually lived in or visited their ‘homeland.’ Additionally, diasporic studies can disrupt the assumed fixed relationship between place and identity through creating a link and maintaining connections between both the present ‘here’ and the past or future ‘there’ (Carter, 2005). This is because after moving away from their original homeland, many members of diasporic communities maintain ties with it through family members, memories, and/or by building relationships with members of their same ethnic community in their new host country. In this way, diasporic studies provide the conceptual framework to break down the perceived discrete borders between nation states, as well as the imaginative distinction between different groups (Carter, 2005). In the context of my research, this looks like recognizing that ‘rigid’ boundaries such as nation boundaries can be more fluid, as seen, for example, when people feel connections or loyalty to multiple nations or identities.

I also note that as Christopher Lee (2015) points out, there is an important distinction to be made between ‘Asian diaspora studies’ and ‘asian studies in Asia’. He argues that Asian diaspora studies is more connected to the imperialist gaze since it utilizes research based on networks and its research is primarily conducted outside of the geographical borders of Asia. However, he also explains that both Asian diaspora studies and asian studies in Asia are united in that they are typically perceived as ‘inferior’ to the West and Western knowledge production. In this way, the concept of an ‘Asian diaspora’ from its conception is not a neutral category despite the common assumption that it is referring to an easily defined location or peoples (Lee, 2015). This distinction is

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

important because it recognizes that from the onset, this research on Hmong diaspora operates within a politically charged environment.

Methodology:

I began working on this research the summer of 2020 with my advisor Geography Professor I-Chun Catherine Chang, and continued working on it throughout the 2020-2021 academic school year. Overall, my research for this thesis has occurred over a year-long time frame. For this research, my primary research methods included an extensive literature review, first-person interviews, and a short survey data collection. For my literature review, I reviewed scholarly literature related to broad diaspora and identity research, and Hmong history -- studying how Hmong history of persecution dates back to the 1700s-1800s when the majority of Hmong populations lived in China. Additionally, I also researched the long-lasting influences of the recruitment of Hmong in Laos during the Vietnam War by the United States which led to the forced migration of Hmong populations out of Laos, as well as experiences Hmong people have had living as refugees in various locations. Lastly, I researched Hmong American's experiences living in and adjusting to life in the United States broadly and the Twin Cities more specifically. To help guide my research, I connected with and occasionally interviewed a handful of Hmong scholars in and outside the Twin Cities for key literature to read, relevant individuals and organizations to connect with, as well as general suggestions for my research.

After beginning my literature review and connecting with Hmong scholars, I focused on determining who to interview, compiling my interview questions, and scheduling interviews. In total I had formal interviews with 16 Hmong individuals

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

currently living in the Twin Cities. Of these interviews (excluding one interview where the interviewee submitted typed up responses to my interview questions) all of my interviews were conducted one-on-one via Zoom and each interview ranged approximately between thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews were semi-structured; I had a set of prepared questions organized along the three main themes I am researching: urban lived experiences, history & memory, and networks. These primary interview questions which can be found in the appendix, helped guide my interviews, however, I also asked follow-up questions depending on the interviewee's responses, and skipped over questions depending on time constraints to respect my interviewees other time commitments. In my interviews, I took an actor-centric approach, interacting with interviewees with the understanding that each interviewee has the capacity to reflect on and respond to their own intersectional identities and situations.

In order to identify who to interview, I conducted online research of prominent Twin Cities Hmong community and organization leaders and members. I reached out to interviewees via email or phone and shared my research disclosure form with them before our interview. I also reached out to people or organizations my interviewees themselves referred me to for more people to interview. Utilizing first-person data has helped make these findings more cohesive and more representative of the current various perspectives and experiences of Hmong in the Twin Cities. Additionally, this research was approved by the Social Studies Institutional Review Board (SSIRB) by Macalester College. The identities of interview subjects are kept confidential to protect their privacy and allow people to share personal experiences and perspectives more openly and to

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

minimize self-censorship. I have also limited identifying information not otherwise approved by the interviewee that information pertains to.

It is important to break down the demographics of my interviewees in order to transparently represent the general population I interviewed -- recognizing that while their perspectives are legitimate, they are not entirely representative of the diversity of thought and experiences of Hmong within the Twin Cities. I interviewed 11 women, 4 men, and 1 non-binary Hmong individual. While I did not intend to interview a greater number of female-identifying individuals, this was the result of the people I was able to contact, as well as those who were most willing and receptive to being interviewed. Although I did not ask my interviewees for their exact ages, they ranged in age from college students to established working professionals. I note that most, if not all, of the people I interviewed were highly educated. Of the working professionals I interviewed, many were in positions of power and had highly visible roles which is what allowed me to connect with them online. Moreover, many interviewees were directly involved in Hmong-owned or majority-Hmong organizations in the Twin Cities.

All interviewees had lived in the Twin Cities for 3 years at the very least, but the greater majority of people I talked with had lived in the Twin Cities for much longer than that. Many had lived in the Twin Cities all their lives, and others had moved to the Twin Cities from a different state in the United States when they were young or after becoming an adult. The interviewees were also primarily first generation or second generation Hmong individuals, and the first generation interviewees typically were born in either Laos or refugee camps in Thailand and had ended up moving to the United States as a young child or teenager. Thus, many of those who I interviewed that were first generation

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

may also be classified as part of the 1.5 generation who are people that are born in a different country and move to the United States in their childhood. Additionally, since all interviews were conducted in English, it is important to acknowledge that one of the limitations of my research is that my interviewee pool does not encompass the direct perspectives of current elders in the Hmong population who may not speak English. However, I was able to learn about some perspective current Hmong elders have more tangentially. Overall, I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to interview with so many extremely generous and reflective individuals who were both open in sharing their time, as well as their extremely personal experiences and feelings.

After completing my interviews, I also sent out a relatively short survey to attempt to gain more quantitative data. I sent this survey to people I interviewed asking them to fill it out and share it with friends and family members if possible. Additionally, with the help of a friend who is Hmong, I circulated the survey on Hmong Facebook groups trying to reach a larger audience. I also reached out to Hmong student unions at colleges in the Twin Cities. The survey results were collected anonymously and from them I received 20 responses. The demographic breakdown of those I surveyed was also majority female with 80% female respondents. Of the people who completed the survey, there was also an almost 50-50 split of people who were first generation versus second generation. One individual wrote in that they were a part of the 1.5 generation who had been born abroad, but had moved to the U.S. at a young age. The number of years in which respondents had lived in the Twin Cities ranged from 1 to 35 years, with an average of 18 years. Due to the small sample size of people who responded to the

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

survey, in this thesis, I use the survey data as additional qualitative research instead of analyzing the data quantitatively.

Context in which this research was conducted:

While ideally these interviews would have been conducted in-person, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews had to be conducted virtually for both the safety of my interviewees and myself. All interviews were held over Zoom, and with the consent of my interviewees I recorded the interviews to transcribe them. Apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, at the time when I started conducting interviews the summer of 2020, the George Floyd protests were taking place in Minneapolis. These protests followed the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and represent an ongoing series of protests against police brutality and racism in the United States. It was in the context of these events that this research took place which potentially contributed to the awareness and discussion within interviews on anti-blackness and colorism within the Twin Cities Hmong community, Asian identity amidst increasing anti-Asian discrimination and violence partially due to fears surrounding COVID-19, and general polarization within the Twin Cities Hmong community due to politics.

My positionality as a researcher:

For research studying identity and prioritizing first-person interviews, I believe it is also important to acknowledge my own positionality. This is because my positionality may have influence the types of conversations I was able to have with interviewees. Additionally, my positionality relates to my personal understanding of my interviewees' experiences. I am an Asian American woman myself with South Asian heritage. My

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

South Asian identity perhaps is most relevant in the conversations I had with interviewees on the relationship between the Twin Cities Hmong community and other non-white communities which included discussions on relationships with South Asians. While there is value in having someone who is not as deeply embedded within a community share their observations and interactions with it, at the same time, it is also important to note that it can be problematic when outsiders go into communities and then afterwards, tell the stories they learn from a dominant and etic perspective. Additionally, as some of my interviewees mentioned to or discussed with me, academic research can also end up being very exploitative. These aspects of potential exploitation or concern are particularly important to acknowledge especially because research based on first-person is reliant on people sharing extremely personal and sometimes traumatic stories. Although I am not Hmong, I hope that this research can help uplift Hmong voices and experiences -- further contributing to the discussion of how we understand identity and various ethnic communities within the U.S. and in other regions of the world -- instead of homogenizing or erasing different experiences that don't fit into dominant society's expectations.

Background Context and Literature Review:

a. Double Diaspora

Hmong are a population considered by scholar Jeremy Hein (2006 and 2013) to have experienced a double diaspora -- first from China to Southeast Asia, and later from Laos to the United States. In both instances, Hmong were forced to migrate due to persecution and conflict. The Hmong originally lived in China for hundreds of years as farmers, however from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s they were forced to migrate from

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

China due to conflict. Even when living *within* China there were forced migration processes that occurred. To elaborate, Hmong populations had initially lived in the lowlands in China, however, following conflict with the central government during the 1600s, they were forced to migrate to the highlands. From China in the mid-1700s to mid-1800s, Hmong migrated to various locations in Southeast Asia including Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. As one of the prime locations of migration, by the 1960s, the Hmong in Laos numbered about three hundred thousand (Hein, 2013).

This ‘double diaspora’ history is significant because as Hein (2006 and 2013) discusses, due to this history, Hmong, like any group who have experienced forced migration and are part of a diaspora, have developed a very ‘distinctive ethnic identity’. Hein identifies four main features of this distinctive ethnic identity: (1) The idealized conception of the golden age before forced migration; (2) Strong self-determination; (3) Strong ethnic boundaries (distinctly separating in-group from out-group); and (4) Collective memory of dispersal from the homeland (Hein, 2013). Importantly, Hein’s research focuses on how Hmong American’s group identity has been influenced by their history and experiences living in China and Laos (Hein, 2006). As Hein (2013) explains it, part of the uniqueness of applying a ‘double diaspora’ understanding of Hmong history is that “among European Americans, narratives about migration typically involve one ancestral locale,” while Hmong “folklore has a dual orientation that begins with China and then incorporates Laos” (p.227). Thus, this ‘double diaspora’ conception is important because it illustrates how far back the memory of diaspora begins and it shows how the conceptualization of the ‘homeland’ varies from individual to individual and is impacted by generations. For example, some people trace their homeland back to China, while

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

others trace their homeland back to Laos. Thus, a ‘double diaspora’ understanding becomes one of the ways we can start understanding how history influences ethnic identities today.

While this dual orientation of double diaspora does reflect Hmong history, it is also important to push back a little on this idea to bring about a more nuanced perspective on the idea of the homeland. Although it is true that Hmong people have a long history of forced persecution, there is also a long period of time between the double diasporas Hein describes, first from China and then from Laos. Ultimately, this ‘double diaspora’ perspective is reliant on understanding the ‘homeland’ as a mythical place in memory that serves as a unifying force for people in the diaspora. While a mythical homeland can unify people, at the same time, the homeland is constantly being negotiated since rather than only existing in the distant past, homelands can also exist at different scales and not solely be attached to nationalism. For example, some Hmong Americans may look more locally to their lives in the United States to develop their conception of where home is. In this way, just as some attribute Laos as the homeland and others look further back to China, homelands are simultaneously relative to individual perception as well as to broader society’s conceptions.

From previously conducted research, there are a handful of ways in which we can observe the varying and complicated relationships people have with the notion of homeland. As Chia Youyee Vang sheds light on in *Hmong America* (2010), the later refugee-settlement processes of Hmong populations showcase different perceptions people have on where the ‘homeland’ exists and ultimately these different perceptions on the ‘homeland’ influenced people’s decision making on where to live. She writes:

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

“Beginning in early 1976, refugee-settlement programs dispersed Hmong throughout North America, South America, Europe, and Oceania, thus creating the Hmong diaspora in the West. Migration within and across nation-states would eventually shape the Hmong communities within these disparate places. Interestingly, some Hmong risked their lives to arrive in Thailand only to agree to go back to Laos shortly thereafter. Others took the opportunity to return to the original homeland by applying to be resettled in China.” (Vang, p. 42)

In this way, migration processes, and people’s choices about where to ‘return to’ or where to move to directly indicates that there was and is a variety of perspectives and opinions on where the homeland is located. However, even having a similar understanding of what the homeland is does not mean people feel the same way about it. For example, for older generations of Hmong in America, many “remain nostalgic for their homeland in Laos (Lee 2006, p. 20 and 2009; Hillmer 2010, pp. 242–43; Yang 2008, p. 33), since they were torn from their country of birth involuntarily due to conflict” (Baird, 2019). Conversely, even those who attribute Laos as the ‘homeland’ may feel negatively about it because of the persecution they experienced when they lived there.

Part of the importance of the double diaspora conception relates to the over-emphasis on national-origins to understand different ethnic groups or minorities within Western countries and Hmong associated perceptions of ‘statelessness.’ To elaborate, in the United States, “to participate in the dominant national-origins discourse,” Hmong Americans are forced cite Laos as their ‘homeland,” however, since Hmong people arrived as a diaspora population to Laos in the 19th century, many Hmong Americans find they have to “tell a story, not just name the country Laos, to articulate what homeland means to them” (Hein, 2012, p.50).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

b. Participation in the Vietnam War

As noted above, Hmong participation in the Vietnam War led to a secondary large, forced migration of Hmong people. This is particularly relevant to the Twin Cities Hmong community because the majority of Hmong in the U.S. today arrived as refugees from Laos directly following the end of the Vietnam War. Thus, breaking down the context in which Hmong people ended up in the U.S. is important. In 1961, the Hmong in Laos were recruited by the U.S. military to act as a secret military force to help the U.S. fight against the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese soldiers during the Vietnam War following to the U.S.'s desire to stop communism from spreading in the region. The Hmong troops recruited were known as the Special Guerrilla Unit, and participation in the Vietnam War had atrocious outcomes for the Hmong population in Laos. By 1973, when the U.S. ended combat operations in Southeast Asia, about 17,000 Hmong soldiers and over 50,000 Hmong civilians had been killed due to the war (Hein, 2006). However, when the U.S. withdrew from the region, Hmong were provided with little support and were forced to leave Laos to escape persecution. As political refugees, Hmong moved across several Southeast Asian countries, and some eventually settled in the United States. Notably, the Twin Cities area has become home to one of the largest concentrations of Hmong in America.

Ultimately, these traumatic experiences and past are deeply embedded and connected to Hmong identity, and relate to academic discussions on how trauma is passed down from generation to generation within communities. Moreover, this history helps explain Hmong behavior upon arriving in the United States. After arriving in the U.S., many Hmong started protesting politically against the Lao government, and many lobbied

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

the U.S. Congress to modify the requirements for obtaining U.S. citizenship to benefit Hmong veterans and their families. Eventually the U.S. took up the Hmong Veterans Naturalization Act (HVNA) in May 2000 (Hein, 2006) which removed barriers to naturalization for some Hmong by waiving the English language requirement and taking into consideration the difficulty of the civic requirement.

c. Migration to the U.S. as Refugees

Since the greater majority of Hmong in the U.S. originally arrived as refugees from Laos, many of them have carried over trauma from participation in the war, persecution, and living in refugee camps. However, moving to the U.S. did not immediately erase or fix these traumatic experiences. Instead, upon moving to the U.S., Hmong people had to face new and additional challenges. For example, following their initial resettlement in the U.S., many Hmong were surprised to discover the lack of awareness Americans had on Hmong people's roles in the war (primarily because it was initially kept secret from the American public), and many faced discrimination and racism interacting with other Americans. Furthermore, just as Dia Cha (2013) explains in "Women in the Hmong Diaspora," after moving to the U.S., many Hmong also had to deal with the pressure created from the model minority myth which are high expectations within the U.S. on Asian American's ability to succeed -- ultimately allowing for the dismissal of challenges Hmong communities in the U.S. face and the lack of adequate programs. This issue relates to ongoing academic discussion on problems with Asian American stereotypes, as well as discussions of how certain labels can be harmful and not representative of people's experiences or identities.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Moreover, due to the American policy of dispersal to different sites for refugee settlement (in an attempt to make refugee assimilation easier), initial migration to the U.S. ended up isolating many Hmong families from their extended relatives and clan leaders. As a result, secondary migration processes -- where families resettled themselves in different parts of the U.S. to be closer to relatives -- occurred as finances allowed (Ng, 2008). This secondary migration process has allowed for a greater development of different Hmong hubs and concentrations -- particularly in Wisconsin, Minnesota and California. Notably, many Hmong were resettled in the Twin Cities due to its large amount of church sponsors and nonprofit organizations (Pha, 2019).

Considered the 'Hmong Capital' of the U.S., the Twin Cities is especially unique because it has the highest urban concentration of Hmong in America and Hmong are one of the dominant ethnic groups in the region. As a result, the Twin Cities Hmong community is extremely well connected and has access to many different local Hmong resources and organizations. In recent years, Twin Cities Hmong have had to deal with more intergenerational conflict as younger generations have become more interested in assimilation and becoming Americanized, with less interest in listening to elders or following tradition. Other challenges Twin Cities Hmong have faced, similar to many other minority and refugee groups, include figuring out how to retain and maintain cultural traditions, as well as how to preserve memories and experiences in order to pass this knowledge down to future generations.

As one of the primary Hmong hubs in the U.S. that is exceptionally diverse and home to various Hmong social, political and news organizations, the Twin Cities Hmong community is a particularly important group to study. Due to both their size and diversity,

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

studying this community allows for a more nuanced understanding of Hmong identity. Additionally, there is extensive room for research on the relationship between Hmong identity in urban spaces and further breaking down how these different factors impact each other. Furthermore, while there has been research on Hmong in Minnesota, it seems that there is still a need for more recent and contemporary research in the Twin Cities, focused on the relationship between past histories (e.g. memory and experience of war and migration) with the social construction of identity, and further exploring how this trauma has shaped them. It is also important to research Hmong identity in the Twin Cities amidst the various networks of Hmong communities through Minnesota and the U.S., especially considering that the Twin Cities is one of the primary focal points of these networks in the United States.

Accordingly, my research is poised to contribute to ongoing diaspora research by exploring how communities, particularly Asian communities and communities with refugee backgrounds, socially construct identity and navigate various conflicting identities in order to better understand themselves. My research importantly shares a nuanced understanding of identity and diaspora experiences by focusing on the Twin Cities Hmong community in particular. My research also recognizes the significance of landscapes, noting that the Twin Cities Hmong population, due to its urban population, may have significant differences from less urban Hmong populations elsewhere in the United States. Additionally, through utilizing and prioritizing first person accounts and perspectives, my research helps highlight the diversity of people within the Twin Cities Hmong community itself.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

This thesis is broken down into five chapters. After this Introduction, which was Chapter 1, Chapter 2 looks at how the identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities have been influenced by war, migration, and refugee memory and experiences. Chapter 3 explores what the living experiences are like for Hmong living in the Twin Cities -- considering how their direct lived experiences shape and are connected to their identities. Chapter 4 then looks at the ways Twin Cities Hmong identity operates in the context of larger networks of Hmong and non-Hmong people inside and beyond the Twin Cities. Finally, Chapter 5 or my conclusion provides an overarching synthesis and reflection on the social construction of Twin Cities Hmong identity -- while also suggesting room for further research.

Chapter 2: Influence of History on Diaspora Experiences and Personal Identities

Although existing as dynamic, constantly evolving, and diverse communities, diaspora communities are heavily shaped by history – and particularly by historic events that led to the dispersion of a people from their previous homeland. With this understanding, this chapter explores *how the living experiences and identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities have been influenced by war, migration, and refugee memory and experiences*. In other words, my research aims to explore the ways the Twin Cities' Hmong community's individual and collective identities have been shaped and affected directly or indirectly by history. To answer this research question, first I explore the complicated relationships the Twin Cities Hmong community has with the history of the Secret War of Laos -- analyzing the various approaches families take to discuss the past as well the ways the trauma sustained by previous generations can be passed on intergenerationally. Next, I explore the ongoing impacts Hmong Americans refugee experiences have on their lives and identities today before examining the various ways in which different narratives of history and ways we document history relate to how Hmong in the Twin Cities understand themselves and their community. Through this analysis I assert that the Twin Cities Hmong community has a complicated and nuanced relationship with war, migration, and refugee memory and experiences. Despite these differences, the narratives through which history are told shape how Twin Cities Hmong individuals and families see themselves.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Relationship with History of War:

a. Approaches to Discussions of War

Largely due to the complicated history and memory the Twin Cities Hmong community retains regarding their involvement during the Secret War of Laos specifically, it appears that there is no universal approach that Twin Cities Hmong families take to discussing the past. During interviews, when I posed the question, “How is Hmong memory and history of war discussed within your family and your community nowadays?” -- perhaps surprisingly, there was a wide variety of answers provided with little consistency across individuals. The variation in responses ended up relating to the specific interviewee’s personal family situations, their individual identities, as well as their own critical perspectives on war.

A handful of people I interviewed shared that, as they saw it, the Hmong history of war was and is rarely talked about within their families and/or larger community. Some people indicated that the topic of war was essentially taboo in their families primarily due to the trauma and PTSD associated with memories and stories from that time. In addition to this, a few individuals expressed that language barriers have limited their personal abilities to discuss these topics with their older family members and grandparents. This language barrier stems from how some Hmong people, particularly of younger generations, are unable to speak Hmong fluently, while Hmong elders who retain direct memories of the war do not speak English fluently.

One young professional I interviewed spoke towards this point. They explained that since their mother had come to the United States as a very young child, the stories she shared were primarily about what it was like being a refugee immigrant in America

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

as a young child rather than about the war itself. In this vein, stories she shared included learning English through the children's television show Sesame Street and helping translate for her parents from an extremely young age. In this context, the person I interviewed described how for them it was their grandparents who held more direct memory of the Hmong experience during the war. However, they explain, "My grandmother doesn't talk about the war at all. I also just don't talk to her a whole lot because of language barriers -- which is another hard thing" (Interviewee 15, 2020). They further explain that this language barrier due to not being able to speak Hmong stemmed from their mother's belief that by only speaking English they might have an easier time assimilating to life in the America:

"Another thing that is talked about a lot in the Hmong community is the loss of the Hmong language in the attempts to assimilate or forced assimilation to American society in English. I think that can bring a lot of shame to a person, you know, have you ever gone to a community and you get shamed by elders for not knowing your language? And part of that is also [because] my parents thought I would be more successful and have an easier time in American culture if I spoke English well." (Interviewee 15, 2020)

Thus, this language barrier, arising from assimilation processes to the U.S., can make communication between generations difficult. This is also reflective of the loss of the Hmong language within the Hmong American community generally. It is important because it shows the ways assimilation processes have changed how individuals are able to interact with stories about their own histories, as well as the extent to which they feel validated and accepted by elders within their own community as we see from Interviewee 15's experience above.

Aside from language, another factor brought up in interviews that can prevent the widespread sharing of Hmong war stories relates to how not all Hmong families in the

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Twin Cities and throughout the United States *have* personal war stories to share. One of the people I interviewed explained that in her family, the history of war is not discussed unless she explicitly asks a question relating to it. As she sees it, this behavior relates to her family's more distant relationship from the war. She explains:

“None of my family was involved with the war with being a nurse or being a soldier or anything... Our relationship with the war is through forced relocation and being refugees and then coming to the United States... And because of that, my family doesn't have war stories necessarily. The little that I do know about that time, I've had to go out and ask like my Aunties, and then the one Auntie I talk to the most was born in the United States, so she can only tell me what she's witnessed or heard. So, I don't really have any firsthand accounts of the stories of the war.” (Interviewee 16, 2020)

At the same time, even when interviewees had war stories deeply embedded in their immediate family and even when language did not pose a barrier, sometimes personal characteristics like age or gender limited their ability to participate in conversations about the war if they did arise. A current Hmong undergraduate student I interviewed explained that because she is one of the youngest children in her family, the stories she has learned about the war primarily came from her siblings sharing with her what they had learned from her dad or from her overhearing stories her mother would talk about on the phone with other friends or relatives. She explains that the topic of war when she was growing up,

“especially as a child...felt more like a taboo subject, because my dad was a soldier in the war, and he didn't like talking about it -- or not to us as children. And he never said anything, but [my siblings and I] surmised, especially as we grew up and came to understand that he probably had PTSD from it. And so, I think it wasn't until we all grew up that I heard more stories from my dad about his experiences. But these largely have been through my other siblings. I think my other siblings have asked him and maybe he was more open to them because they were older.” (Interviewee 12, 2020)

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Here, this interviewee directly expresses the feeling that her age prevented her from being able to learn directly from her dad about his own experiences during the war. Instead, due to her age, the topic of war “wasn’t a topic that was openly discussed all the time. It was just something that [they] kind of briefly touched upon in phases throughout [her] life.” Yet at the same time, the stories that she did hear growing up, for example overhearing her mother talking on the phone stuck with her. In our interview, she recounted how, from eavesdropping, she learned about her mother’s experiences as kid “fleeing through the jungles and stuff, and how sometimes you ran without shoes, and how sometimes you would have to abandon your meal because of the smoke and people were coming and so you don’t even get to eat” (Interviewee 12, 2020). In this way, even though she was not directly a part of the storytelling process, this shows how one's identity is shaped through narratives that are affirmed over and over again.

Another woman I interviewed, who is now a mother, attributed her identity as a woman to the reason why she was not a part of war story conversations within her family and community. Upon being asked if the history and memory of war were discussed within her family or community, she said, “I would say it’s not discussed at all within families and communities. But I want to say that maybe it’s because I’m a woman, and so I’m not at the discussion table when they’re talking about it” (Interviewee 5, 2020). Here, the idea that gender identity can limit the spaces you are allowed into and the access you have to your community’s past is important to consider.

Some interviewees also attributed a decrease to the discussion of war to a deeply felt concern about the slow loss of cultural history within the Hmong American community -- stemming particularly from the fact that many Hmong veterans and war

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

generals from the Secret War of Laos are aging, and many now, like renowned General Vang Pao, have already passed away. One person I interviewed explained that the generation of veterans from that time period is now in “their 70s and 80s, and they are dying off and there’s very few of those people left. And the ones who are left, they would have been teenagers during that time. Or preteens to tell the truth,” (Interviewee 4, 2020). With the death of this generation, interviewees asserted that there is “less and less” discussion of the memory and history of war in the Twin Cities Hmong community generally, and that there is fear that stories about the war are being lost without ever being recorded.

Conversely, many other interviewees shared that for their families or simply from their point of view, war is actually a frequently discussed topic. However, even among those who agreed with the assertion that war is a commonly discussed topic, there are differences in the ways that war shows up in conversations. In some Hmong families, the discussion of war is centered on pride and celebration for the hard-work and sacrifice their community and relatives have made over the years. For example, one Hmong father I interviewed explains that he talks openly and frequently about Hmong involvement in the Secret War of Laos with his kids:

“Within my family, I tell my kids all the time with pride how the Hmong fought with the Americans, alongside the Americans, to stave off communism, to fight for our freedom. And again, I tell [my kids] all the time, we’re in America because we fought with America. So, I tell them with a manner of pride that we earned our ticket to America with blood and sacrifice.” (Interviewee 3, 2020)

In other words, Interviewee 3 actively shares a proud and celebratory narrative around the war with his kids. Interestingly enough though, he also acknowledges that his own parents who have more direct experiences with the war never talk about it. He says,

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

“They don’t really know how to put it into words... For them it was all about survival. And now that we get to retrospectively look back at it – now, we know it’s more than just survival. It’s also politics involved, and there were all sorts of things involved, and you know, we are one of the results -- coming to America,” (Interviewee 3). This shift Interviewee 3 expresses from his parents not talking about the war due to their sole focus on survival, to where he now openly shares the history of war with his own kids demonstrates how people’s relationships with history evolves over time and are often reflective of particular circumstances.

Similarly, another person I interviewed stated that war is “a topic of history that we constantly talk about” and there is a strong element of ‘pride’ associated with sharing those stories. Considering how much her parents and grandparents have sacrificed for her and her siblings, she explains that the past is:

“something that we find that we are so proud of that sometimes we boast about it. But like, sometimes it *feels* like we’re boasting about it. It’s something that we celebrate very highly just because we feel like it’s something to be remembered because family and elders are such an important thing in our culture. It’s like just trying to remember how we were brought here and just be thankful for that. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that Hmong people have historically ... been sort of marginalized, like even when we were in China in the ancient-ancient ages, we were marginalized.” (Interviewee 8, 2020).

In this way, the proud and frequent discussions related to war can also be interpreted as a way to share stories of overcoming hardship to move forward from that long history of marginalization and oppression which dates back as far as China.

Another interviewee attributes the open sharing of war stories in her family to a desensitization to the trauma of war. In discussing her family dynamics, she explains:

“I feel like they’ve been so exposed to the pain of war and they’re so desensitized about it that at family gatherings, we just talk about it with no

filter. Like we would have a shaman ceremony, and my grandma will just tell war stories. You know like [how] grandmas will tell you fairy tales and all that at bed time? Like my grandma just tells us war stories.... And I grew up listening to it, and it's just kind of the norm" (Interviewee 11, 2020).

Moreover, from Interviewee 11's perspective, this exposure and resulting desensitization to trauma explains some of the division between those in the Hmong community who are always talking about war and sharing those stories versus the other part of the community who wants to move beyond it. According to her,

"The thing about the Hmong community is that it is so divided between the first generation people who are from Thailand, from Laos, who still have those memories versus the other people who have already migrated to the States way before -- and they don't have the recollection of that trauma, and so they can't 'trauma bond' with others. It's divided because it's like some people do have that trauma and some people don't." (Interviewee 11, 2020)

While there does appear to be a handful of other factors that influence whether or not Hmong people talk about the war, Interviewee 11 brings up a really fascinating point on the ways people's direct experiences with trauma of the past shape their identities and how much they feel able to connect to others.

b. Critiques of Common War Narratives

As established, there are various factors that influence the frequency to which Hmong people discuss war such as age or gender, but at the same time, the ways in which the war is talked about and its frequency have the inverse effect in shaping how people understand themselves and their community. Recognizing this, many people have raised different nuanced critiques on the ways the Secret War of Laos is discussed and represented within the Twin Cities Hmong narrative and psyche.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

One critique raised is that how the war is currently talked about within the Hmong American community is extremely centering of patriarchy to the degree that women's stories and queer stories are ignored or erased. One interviewee expresses this feeling succinctly stating her concern is that her "understanding of the war and how it differs from the mainstream is that sometimes it can be very centering of patriarchy, and with that, I think a lot of stories that are lost are obviously women's stories. And also, I think about the queer and trans Hmong folks that have stories from the war that I never hear about. And you know my generation ... we're not the first queer or trans Hmong people...and we're not going to be the last. So those are stories that I know are missing, and that makes me really sad," (Interviewee 16, 2020). This critique seems to suggest that current narratives of war within the Hmong community prioritize certain identities at the expense of others – which perhaps has further implications for how people come to understand the legitimacy of their own identities.

Another important critique is how the dominant narrative and focus on war can actually be argued as feeding into colonialist modes of thought. For example, Interviewee 16 explains that "war is an imperial act" and that:

"It's such a huge part of our psyche as Hmong people and I also think it's why we simp¹ so hard for the U.S. government and for white people because we were conditioned. We were recruited by the U.S. military, we were recruited to become meat shields essentially, and to help guide people through the jungles and like fucking die for white soldiers or just like white America. And so that sort of psychology I definitely see playing out here today when I see Hmong people defending property and the U.S. government and white people." (Interviewee 16, 2020)

¹ "Simp is an Internet slang term describing someone who performs excessive sympathy and attention toward another person, sometimes in pursuit of a sexual relationship" (Wikipedia, 2021)

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

In her eyes, further proof that this emphasis on war and preoccupation with the American government represents “colonized behavior” is because straight cis Hmong men are the ones who defend it the hardest.

In line with the idea of how a focus on war is exploitation, another narrative critique explores this exploitation through the idea of placation. Interviewee 15 explained in frustration the ways in which narratives can be exploitative:

“That narrative of like, “we fought in the war and we’re veterans and we’re Americans because we’re veterans” is also a way that I’ve seen that the United States has exploited and kind of placated Hmong people. Because that actually fucked us over – they really used us as meat shields for a war that they should have never fought. And then they didn’t want to bring us over here initially.” (Interviewee 15, 2020).

Going further, Interviewee 15 explains that within the Hmong American community, there is the narrative that the U.S. saved them from the jungles, however, as Interviewee 15 sees it, there is a disconnect between that narrative and the fact that part of the reason Hmong ended up ‘in the jungles’ was due to the U.S. in the first place. Interviewee 15 further expresses a broader community desire to shift how the war is discussed. They explain, “I think younger folks, who are my age and younger, are starting to talk about the war in a more honest way and that... the United States didn’t save us. It was the least they could do to take us out of that dangerous situation that they brought us into.”

In line with rethinking narratives, in our conversation, Interviewee 9 reflected on how the frequency of which war narratives are shared have a strong impact -- and thus make it necessary for critical and intentional reflection as a result. She explains that for her, even though she worked hard to resist the narrative of importance placed on war “just hearing it over and over again really has shaped who [she is] as a person.” In this way, Interviewee 9 stresses the importance of recognizing the ways our minds are

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

colonized by white hegemony, thinking about the “standards about beauty standards, standards about food, how you talk, your lexicon, values around class,” and stopping yourself to consider “‘am I operating from a colonized mind?’ Or ‘Am I operating truly from where I want to be as a Hmong person?’” (Interviewee 9, 2020).

In considering the ways our minds can be colonized, it’s also important to recognize our positionality within the context of war. One person I interviewed discusses that as a Hmong American her positionality is complicated because she is both a person from a people with direct exposure to war, and also a citizen in a nation that is a huge war power. She puts this into words quite powerfully:

“Of course war has shaped my whole family’s history. And then coming to America and being Hmong American, experiencing how America continues to perpetuate war all over the world greatly influences who I am today. So, it’s not just that experience of being directly in a war zone, but also being in the most powerful nation in the world and witnessing how it perpetuates that power to control -- whether its natural resources or people around the world, means that I need to -- or I have chosen to be conscious to all of that. There is, I think, a great understanding of what it means to be someone who lives in a war zone, but also to be somebody who is a citizen of a country that exercises power, that decides to go to war with other nations. So, it’s not just about me being Hmong. It’s about me being Hmong in certain places and times, and what that has all meant.” (Interviewee 2, 2020)

Others expressed that this history of war and dependence on the United States government has made a number of Hmong Americans feel that the United States owes them. One interviewee expresses that there is a ‘misconception’ among the older generation that they actively fought in the U.S. Army as veterans. Instead as Interviewee 9 sees it, the older generation that participated in the war “never truly worked for the U.S. military. They were never truly employees of the U.S. or CIA or the U.S. Intelligence or U.S. army or anything. They were just subcontractors under General Vang Pao. But then, they have this sense like they were soldiers under the U.S. Army” because they “fought

with the Americans.” Another person I interviewed expressed that he felt that the “expectation that came from the war is a very negative expectation-based culture on a sense of entitlement of free service and free goods,” within the Hmong American community. As he sees it, this expectation “hurts some people’s ability to grow” (Interviewee 4, 2020).

Others, in a similar manner, see that solely focusing on war, makes it so that the Hmong Americans see themselves as victims, and believe that it is important to move beyond that mindset. Interviewee 5 explained, “I think one thing is that we often see ourselves as victims you know. And we need to stop thinking about that and start thinking about survivors, because even after 45 years, there are still a lot of people who have not healed from the war.” Moving beyond the war and associated victim mindset is also associated with a desire to move beyond freezing Hmong in the U.S. as perpetual refugees without acknowledging their lived experiences today. Likewise, Interviewee 11 shows how there are people hoping to reframe commonly told narratives to one in which a brighter future is visible. She explains, “I feel like we've definitely made progress as a community, as a whole. Because nowadays, you see a lot more like Hmong artists who are not only telling stories and making art related to the war, but also moving past that pain narrative and moving towards a brighter future.”

c. Intergenerational Trauma

Along with the complicated, varying, and extremely nuanced perspectives and relationships many Twin Cities Hmong people have with the subject of the war, there was fairly wide-spread agreement across individuals I interviewed that this history of war continues to affect the identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities through the phenomena of

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

intergenerational trauma. Intergenerational trauma generally refers to how “trauma experienced in one generation affects the health and well-being of descendants of future generations” (Sangalang and Vang, 2017). In the context of the Twin Cities Hmong population, this intergenerational trauma refers to how even people who did not directly live through the Secret War of Laos or live in refugee camps can still identify specific ways their lives have been influenced and shaped by the traumatic experiences and memories their older family members, friends, and community members hold onto. It is in this way that the trauma of the Hmong American community is passed on to younger generations.

Everyone I talked with had stories about war (stories they had heard if they had not experienced themselves) and stories about the ways people they knew had been affected by war, migration, and/or refugee experiences. One of the people I interviewed noted how their friend’s father who had been a soldier during the Secret War of Laos, had PTSD (although it had never been diagnosed) was unable to sleep through the night. And the stories generally circulating within the community are extremely painful. Interviewee 15 explained some of the stories they have heard shared within their community:

“I would hear stories about people trying to cross the Mekong River and being shot at, people drowning in the river; you have stories about people drugging their babies with opium so that they wouldn’t get caught because if their baby cries, you get caught by soldiers and you would get murdered on the spot.” (Interviewee 15, 2020).

Others, particularly younger generations, discussed how their family and community’s position as refugees in the U.S. with lower socioeconomic status because of the context in which they arrived in the U.S. affected their lives from being pushed into a

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

translator role from a very young age to not having the same access to resources that their peers had.

This issue of intergenerational trauma is especially compelling because it traces historical events and experiences through generations. One of the people I interviewed explained this quite succinctly:

“I took on that trauma internally, and internalized that, because war and violence is very traumatic, so even though I didn’t experience it, I imagined that history, and it’s real, in my mind, because that’s the experience I imagined my parents experienced, so there’s that kind of passing on of that, through that kind of imagined history.” (Interviewee 1, 2020)

In other words, Interviewee 1’s account depicts how history, even imagined history and folklore, continue to have long lasting effects on self-identity and how people interact with the world around them. Here, trauma is sustained and becomes a part of the self-narrative of identity for the Twin Cities Hmong community even if this trauma isn’t always perceptible to people who are not a part of the community. Ultimately, intergenerational trauma highlights the importance of being aware of other communities - without awareness of the experiences others have lived (which is what happened when many Hmong initially arrived in the U.S.), many outsiders to a community remain unaware of the trauma entire communities face and continue to be influenced by.

Interviewee 9 furthers this idea of intergenerational trauma. She explains that there’s intergenerational trauma which is “historical trauma that is passed down through generations.” To illustrate this, she explains:

“Even though I never really experienced the war myself because I was born in a Thai refugee camp and then we came over when I wasn’t even one years old, so I literally have no memory of it. But those memories, and that feeling, that emotion, that lived, embodied trauma is passed on to me. And you know, you really do *feel* it like it’s very embodied. Like you identify

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

yourself as a refugee and really identify with the journey.” (Interviewee 9, 2020)

Ongoing Impact of Hmong American Refugee Experience:

In addition to the history and memory of war, more recent refugee experiences living in the U.S. also have an ongoing effect on Twin Cities Hmong identity. In conversations I held with people, the Hmong refugee experience was framed in both a positive light because of how it has opened up opportunities, as well as in a more negative light due to the challenges associated with being a refugee. In the United States, the context of the refugee experience for the Hmong population is particularly poignant -- this is because, as stated previously, the majority of Hmong in the America came to the United States as refugees following the end of the Secret War of Laos. Interviewee 2 explains this:

“Almost every Hmong person who is in the U.S. came are products of war and became refugees, and so, in that way, obviously, just having that connection means that everybody is impacted by those memories of war or those stories of war because people have lost family members...and they have been forced to separate from their families for safety and protection.” (Interviewee 2, 2020)

The positive framings of the refugee experience focus on how the challenges Hmong people have faced as refugees has made them more resilient and more capable of dealing with future challenges. One man I interviewed explained that, in his eyes, “being a refugee coming to this country, it really helped us...to become a better person. I don’t know what I would do if I... happened to be born in this country. My perception of things would probably be a lot different,” He explained further that, as a refugee, “you learn to be more patient, you’re more resilient about whatever situations that might come your way...And if you’ve gone through so much in your life, so much difficulty in your life,

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

hardship in your life, then you can really overcome anything” (Interviewee 6, 2020).

Interviewee 13 reaffirms this idea claiming that due to her refugee experiences growing up, “no challenge in life seems too great for [her].”

Not necessarily meaning to glorify war or the deaths that took place, one of the people I interviewed expressed a sense of gratitude for the Vietnam War in the sense that it ultimately ended up providing a catalyst bringing so many Hmong to the United States.

Interviewee 3 states:

“Honestly, the Vietnam War to me was basically the light that shined-- I know it was many many things outside of this, but to the Hmong world, it really was the light that shined a spotlight on our people. Because I mean prior to that, we were just a people up in the mountains, and we had no relatives whatsoever in the global scheme of things at all, we were just barefooted -- we were just basically the lost tribe of Brazil. You know those lost tribes of Brazil that no one's ever had contact with. That's basically how the Hmong were before the Vietnam War...and so to me, the war was really the coming out of the Hmong I would say. That's how I look at it. Because without the war, we would still be in Laos, still barefooted up in the mountains, you know, that's basically who we were. And now after the war, we've now been exposed to technology, education, history and so it's really brought us out into the world.” (Interviewee 3, 2020)

Conversely, many interviewees also shared direct challenges the Twin Cities Hmong population has faced due to their refugee experiences. One of the most immediate and tangible challenges stemming from being a refugee related to financial issues and poverty. Interviewee 11 sheds light on these immediate challenges of being a refugee. She describes the refugee experience as taking a financial toll on her and her family because they came directly to the U.S. from refugee camps. And since her parents “weren't really able to get a proper education” and didn't know enough English, it was difficult to sustain a job. In her case, since she still retains memories of the refugee camps in Thailand, Interviewee 11 feels that the refugee experience is a more immediate reality

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

for her and her family than it might be for other Hmong Americans who were born in the U.S. for example. She explains, “In my head, it's like we haven't gone as far away from the life of the camps as I had wished. And I definitely have a stronger drive than my other Asian and my other Hmong American friends who don't have a similar background as me.” Here, her discussion of ‘similar background’ looks towards having direct refugee camp or immigrant experiences, and it is this background which perhaps has led to her strong desire to move further away from the refugee experience which is so heavily tied to poverty and struggle.

In that sense, Interviewee 11 also notices too how these differences can create divisions even within Hmong American friendships. She says when she thinks about it, Hmong American kids with direct refugee immigrant background (or first generation youth) are all friends,

“But then, I feel like we’re unable to befriend Hmong Americans who aren’t first gen as well just because there’s such a big cultural difference because they’ve already...assimilated to American culture -- like that American teenage-type culture? Whereas we haven’t. And so, it’s definitely difficult to befriend each other and maintain a friendship like that.” (Interviewee 11, 2020).

Interviewee 10 also discusses observing a slight ‘divide’ within the Hmong community based on when people migrated to the U.S. -- making a distinction between the “fortunate Hmong people” who came to the U.S. first, and the people who were initially “left behind.” This distinction expressed was not portrayed as divisive, but simply to indicate a little bit of “bitterness” some have due to the differences in opportunity people had.

Other tangible ways the refugee experience was described as a challenge was how it affected people’s sense of belonging in the U.S., notably in comparison to ‘average’

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Americans. A factor which impacted this sense of belonging was “growing up pretty poor” despite the widely held expectation in American that all Asian Americans are wealthy. Other factors were discussed as looking like parents not having college degrees, parents working multiple part-time jobs and earning less than minimum wage, and experiencing housing instability to give some examples. Interviewee 15 explains these factors of the refugee experience as being “a reality for a lot more Hmong people than we like to think about...I mean just not having money and not having a home comes from a deep sense of shame I think in general which not any of our faults right? It’s a system and nation that fails us, [fails to] house us.”

In interviews, the refugee experience was also linked to continued conflict and struggle with navigating between different cultures -- particularly facing more traditional and patriarchal pressures and expectations. As Interviewee 11 expressed, she feels her refugee immigrant background has contributed to this continued struggle even between her and other Hmong American friends who were born in the United States. She expresses feeling like her Hmong friends who are born in the United States have “a different set of morals” than those like her who are first generation, describing that she feels “still stuck with that older mindset, older values where the men are always placed on a pedestal.” Additionally, she feels that her value to her parents only comes from if she can marry into a good household, as opposed to what she can achieve. She explains that “It’s still about what man you're gonna marry rather than what kind of daughter you are.”

When considering the refugee experience of Hmong immigrants, it is also crucial to recognize how the refugee experience has shifted over the years due to the changing

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

needs of the community. According to one interviewee, whereas the Hmong community, after first arriving in the U.S. needed help learning English and navigating bureaucratic systems in the U.S., the needs of the Twin Cities Hmong community now are more related to skill building or building wealth. One of the working professionals I interviewed explains how he constantly feels the “echo” of being a refugee no matter how many things change.

Narratives on ‘Knowing’ History:

With having established the complicated relationships people have with war and refugee experiences, my research presents insights into how knowing or not knowing one’s own history influences the ways people see themselves. In the context of growing up and getting educated in the United States, many second generation interviewees expressed feeling like they did not know their own history but that they had the strong desire to learn more about it. One of the college students I interviewed speaks directly on how complicated it can be to not ‘know’ your own history. Describing the effort she has personally put into researching and learning more about Hmong history, Interviewee 12 expressed that her research “started on the basis of trying to ground myself -- trying to identify for myself what being Hmong means, [and] what the Hmong identity is” by “tracing back to our roots.” She goes further describing that she originally had very limited knowledge about Hmong people’s history at all and ultimately found her individual research to be very empowering stating that “it was from these texts that I gained a more empowering sense of identity as a Hmong person, versus just always the label of being a victim and a refugee” (Interviewee 12, 2020). Here it becomes particularly clear that learning about your past, particularly when you may feel more

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

disconnected from it as a member of a diaspora community, becomes a powerful means to claim a sense of ownership over your own identity and community. This empowerment stemming from knowing your history also relates to a sense of confidence and validation people feel in their experiences.

Inversely tied to the relationship between history and empowerment, one interviewee described the way histories can be used to wield power and ‘gatekeep’ certain aspects of the past. They explain, “We know that when you keep people’s history from them, you keep them from their power.” In this sense, a specific example of people being kept from their power is through the way the history of Hmong queer and trans people has been presented. Illustrating this, Interviewee 15 explains how queerness is often depicted as a new American thing:

“I've heard many times of elders being like, 'Well, being queer and trans is an American thing. It's a new thing. We never used to have that back in the homelands.' And that's just not true because I've actually talked to people before who've talked to elders who've talked about queer and trans people within their villages. But if you know that you're coming from communities that don't really accept that, or they've come to the U.S., and they know that in U.S. that's not something that they want to bring, they get to gatekeep that history, right? They get to not share that history anymore -- to make us have the assumption that we just didn't exist before the United States. We just know that that isn't real. We've existed. Queer and Trans people have existed since the beginning of time. Just because you are choosing not to share those stories about us doesn't mean that we are just a new thing. I think that's like one of the most hard things that queer and trans Hmong people are facing, and even more so young Hmong people, because their parents are having this idea that queerness is a new thing, or that it's a sickness.” (Interviewee 15, 2020)

In addition to empowerment, *knowing* your own history is also related to self-love and appreciation which is exceptionally important for youth from ethnic backgrounds growing up in a dominant white society. Interviewee 11 explains this idea:

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

“I feel like for me, personally, when I was younger I...was really self-hating, like I didn't like the fact that I was Hmong... But as I learned more about our history and how much we've been through as a people, I've come to appreciate my culture so much more. I've come to realize there's so much resilience within this community.” (Interviewee 11, 2020).

Although the shift from self-hatred to self-love may broadly be representative of growing up as person of color in a white-centric United States, the above example still shows the ways memories of the past, even ones you do not directly retain, once shared can help individuals feel more empowered and secure in their own identities, as well as more pride in being Hmong.

Documenting Stories:

A final takeaway to consider regarding the relationship between history and identity looks towards the current efforts the Twin Cities Hmong population has taken in order to document and pass down their stories to younger generations. This is important because it reflects both the immediate perceived needs of the Twin Cities Hmong community regarding sustaining their own culture and community connections, as well as the current steps community members are taking to impact future generations. One interviewee explains:

“In many communities who have faced war there's not a lot of desire to retain those memories, and so it's only now I think that younger people who haven't experienced war, who are second generation have a greater interest in trying to understand that story.” (Interviewee 2, 2020)

This statement expresses the amount of effort currently being put into community sustainability by the Twin Cities Hmong community itself. We can see from this that Hmong individuals themselves play an active role -- exerting their own agency -- in documenting and preserving their history and culture in order to pass it down to future

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

generations. Thus, members of the Hmong community play an important role themselves in making sense of their own identities and sustaining their culture to create a sense of belonging for their community. This further illustrates why the Twin Cities Hmong community needs to have resources available to document these stories whether that be through funding, public or communal spaces, or representation in media for some examples.

Hmong Museum, an online museum dedicated to preserving Hmong history, arts and culture, is an example of efforts members of the Twin Cities Hmong community have taken to document these stories. ‘Unforgotten: An intergenerational project with Hmong Veterans’ is an example of a collection Hmong Museum has implemented with the Special Guerrilla Unit Veterans dedicated to preserving these stories. This project paired Hmong veterans with students to document these stories via film. The ‘Hmong Chronicles’ series is another example of efforts the Hmong Museum has taken to both revive and pass on traditional stories. This series involved the collaboration between Hmong elders and Hmong contemporary artists. To provide an example, *Love Story*, one of the performances in this series involved the collaboration between author Kao Kalia Yang and her father Bee Yang, combined Hmong song poetry written by Bee Yang, and Kao Kalia Yang’s writing in English (Hmong Museum, 2021). Ultimately, as seen through Hmong Museum as an example, there are numerous ways in which culture and history can be documented and is being documented currently.

Conclusion:

Overall, history, both through firsthand experiences and passed on memories, continues to impact both the personal and collective identities within the Twin Cities

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Hmong community. The frequency and manner in which war is discussed within different pockets of the Twin Cities Hmong community and within different families varies greatly. Furthermore, discussions on war are directly related to the specific identities of Hmong individuals, and the types of discussions held have a direct impact on the ways people within the Hmong community understand their community and personal identities. Factors such as lack of language ability and associated shame attached with it sometimes prevent these discussions from being held, and for some people discussions of war are connected to a desensitization of trauma, and for others these discussions are connected to the desire to celebrate and acknowledge sacrifices older generations have made. Importantly, how war and history are commonly discussed creates dominant narratives which also influence people's identities. It is also necessary to recognize the ways both more recent and older refugee experiences shape the identities of individuals as it relates to poverty, family values, and forming friendships with other Hmong Americans. Additionally, the trauma sustained from war, migration, and refugee experiences can also be passed down intergenerationally shaping future generations. Lastly, recognizing the importance of history and fears people hold about losing it, various Hmong organizations and individuals are actively working to document this history and culture. Noting the powerful ways history and past experiences continue to shape the personal and collective identities of Hmong living in the Twin Cities, it is also crucial to critically examine the ways in which current lived experiences influence identity construction for this population.

Chapter 3: Urban Lived Experiences and Identities

With establishing current Twin Cities Hmong American's relationship with their own history and how it has evolved over the years, it is also crucial to take a closer look examining the lived experiences for Hmong living the Twin Cities today -- attempting to analyze how their lived experiences shape their personal and collective identities. Thus, in this chapter, I examine *what the living experiences are like for Hmong living in the Twin Cities and the ways in which their lived experiences have influenced their identities*. Because they look towards the powerful agency people have in determining and analyzing their own lives, lived experiences should not be overlooked. Additionally, studying lived experiences helps highlight the unique and diverse lives of Hmong living in the Twin Cities, helping us better recognize the importance of not overgeneralizing a group of people in any particular region.

In order to study the relationship between urban lived experiences and identity, first I analyze the different decision makers or people and organizations perceived to hold power shaping what it means to be Hmong in the Twin Cities. Next, I explore the various ways Hmong living in the Twin Cities feel being Hmong has influenced their daily life -- analyzing both the benefits and challenges related to this identity. Specifically, I look at the privileges and power Hmong in the Twin Cities have access to; the stereotypes and expectations Hmong people must interact with; the ways people understand their own sense of belonging; before lastly analyzing the ways intergenerational conflict and assimilation factor into everyday lived experiences.

Part 1. Twin Cities Decision Makers:

In understanding the lived experiences of Hmong in the Twin Cities, it is important to understand who has typically been seen as the decision makers within the community and how this may be changing. Traditionally, the Hmong clan system and associated Hmong elders and war veterans have held central positions of power. As Chia Youyee Vang explains in *Hmong America* (2010), “Hmong society was and still is based on a kinship system that is divided into patrilineal clans and further separated by subclans based on lineages. The clan (*xeem*) system serves as both a unifying and dividing force. It determines how people relate to one another” (p.18). The Hmong clan system can be generally understood as a kinship organizing system that is based on the 18 Hmong last names. In this context, it is important to recognize the grounding importance of the clan system. This is because even those who critique the clan system for being extremely patriarchal also recognize the role it has played in keeping Hmong community together. One person I interviewed explains that the Hmong American community “is a community that has survived because of the nature of its relationships in clan systems,” and that even though “there are many challenges in terms of having patriarchal clan system that often feels oppressive,” it was the “[clan system] structure that really facilitated people’s ability to survive,” especially considering the Hmong population’s long history of persecution (Interviewee 2, 2020).

However, the role of the clan system has also been observed to be changing in recent years. One interviewee claimed that “traditionally, the Hmong rely on a clan system to keep things in order. However, in America, the importance of the clan is keeping families bonded and cultural preservation -- and not so much making decisions,”

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

(Interviewee 3, 2020). The Hmong 18 Council, a national organization made up of leaders who each represent the 18 Hmong last names is another formalized traditional form of leadership within the community. Although the Hmong 18 Council does not have any legal binding power, they sometimes put out community-wide rules and guidelines that tend to be recognized at a community-wide level. One example of guidelines they have created include setting a bride price for Hmong women to be capped at \$5,000. One of my interviewees explained that the Hmong 18 Council is “run mainly by Hmong men who are older” and consequently sometimes “don’t have the experience or [don’t] care really about some of the young people and what’s really going on in the world,” (Interviewee 1, 2020). Another female interviewee mentioned that she applauds the recent efforts the council has made to educate the public and noted approvingly how they even have a woman on the council now.

Apart from these more traditional forms of leadership, over the years there other avenues of Twin Cities Hmong community leadership have developed. More recently, various Hmong-owned or Southeast Asian focused organizations have been formed and had leadership roles in the Twin Cities. Some of these organizations include: Hmong American Partners (HAP), Coalition of Asian American Leaders (CAAL), Hmong Cultural Center, Center for Hmong Arts and Talent (CHAT), and Hnub Tshiab: Hmong Women Achieving Together (HWAT). Established in 1990, HAP provides support to Twin Cities immigrants and refugees focusing on resettlement issues and providing culturally appropriate social services such as English classes and computer training. CAAL is an organization focused on bringing people from diverse backgrounds together. Interviewees tended to recognize the importance of this organization. One interviewee

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

explained that CAAL is “a pretty powerful force in terms of having recognition and having manpower to create legislations at the state level.” Hmong Cultural Center is a non-profit focused on both sustaining and teaching Hmong culture. Notably, the Hmong Culture Center’s Hmong Resource Center Library holds “the most comprehensive collective of Hmong-related literature in North America” (Hmong Cultural Center, n.d.). CHAT is a social justice arts organization that focuses on nurturing Hmong artists and youth -- creating a space and platform for them to grow, share art, and build Hmong community through the arts (CHAT, 2021). Lastly, HWAT is a non-profit with the mission to improve the lives of Hmong women. Thinking about cultural, institution, and social change, HWAT works to empower Hmong women and develop their leadership skills (Hnub Tshiab, n.d.). These organizations are just a handful of the various types of organizations active within the Twin Cities that influence the Hmong community.

Over the years there has also been a significant increase in the amount of Hmong political leaders. One person I interviewed explains that “when it comes to participation in American politics, Minnesota has the largest cohort of legislators state-level and lawmakers of Hmong ancestry in the world.” Of these Hmong political leaders, there have also been an increase in female political leaders. In addition, Hmong academic scholars can also be viewed as leaders because of the power they hold in directing what is researched about Hmong communities. The Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University for example, is an academic resource center that is dedicated to promoting scholarly interest in “the rich legacy and complex heritage of the Hmong people” (Center for Hmong Studies, n.d.)

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

With all these avenues in mind, it is important to recognize that there is no single actor making decisions for the Twin Cities Hmong community, and that even among all these external influences, oftentimes decisions are made on an individual or family level. As Chia Youyee Vang (2010) explains, in the early days of Hmong migration to the U.S., there was a smaller, more homogenous Hmong population in which the majority of Hmong had first-hand refugee experiences. With this context, it was easier to have emerging leaders represent the entire community. However, in more recent years the increase in Hmong community-based organizations has made it more difficult to identify an single organization or leader as ‘speaking for the community.’ Additionally, basing leadership off of organizations ends up putting younger, educated Hmong people in positions of power which contradicts the traditional Hmong organization system that prioritizes elders.

Part 2: Daily Life and Identity:

a. Privilege and Holding Power

As already mentioned, the Twin Cities is quite unique because it is home to the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the United States. From what we can see above, the large size of the Twin Cities Hmong community is part of the reason why there are so many different Hmong actors and organizations in leadership roles currently. This unique makeup of the Hmong community from a structural geographic perspective, as well as the fact that the Hmong population in the United States has been here for over 40 years now, has enabled Hmong in the Twin Cities to have access to greater levels of ‘power’ and ‘privilege.’ This greater level of power and privilege is in comparison to Hmong in other locations throughout the United States and abroad, as well as in comparison to

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

some other non-white minority groups in the Twin Cities itself. One of the people I interviewed explains, “I feel very privileged as Hmong American here in the United States in comparison to my Hmong brothers and sisters worldwide,” due to the fact that in the United States and in Minnesota “I think we have much more opportunity to live the American dream” (Interviewee 14, 2020). Another interviewee expressed that something unique about the Twin Cities is that the visibility of the Hmong community here has also led to a decrease in the need for people to ‘explain’ their identities in every new encounter. Interviewee 5 explains her own experiences with this:

“I know that in the state of Minnesota, when I say I am Hmong, everybody knows who I am. But if I got to Iowa or other places, when I say I am Hmong, people still don’t know. They still say, “What is a HAmong?” So, then I still have to explain who I am and where I’m from. Because I have lived in several states and other countries, I realized that as soon as I land in Minnesota, I say I am Hmong, and nobody questions who I am. So that is a privilege.” (Interviewee 5, 2020).

Additionally, with the established nature of the Twin Cities Hmong community, there is also the realization that the organizations the Hmong community has built up over the years also come with power and visibility. Interviewee 5 recognizes this stating: “I see that when you have a larger population and you’re connected to that population, you have certain access that others may not have... So, I’m starting to see myself as someone who holds power or access to power.” She further explains that she holds access to power because people outside of the Hmong community in the Twin Cities will approach her asking if she can help introduce them to certain Hmong political leaders.

However, this larger visibility and size of the Hmong community does not erase the need for specificity. One interviewee expresses that,

“in Minnesota the uniqueness is that Hmong Americans are the largest Asian American group, so oftentimes when we speak about Asian

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Americans, people really mean to say Hmong. And so, I think it's important for people to be specific, because the general stereotype about Asian Americans is that it is a model minority...But we also know that the largest Asian Americans are not just Hmong, but also we have a great number of needs that continue to be invisible because of what is assumed about Asian Americans." (Interviewee 2, 2020).

b. Stereotypes and Expectations

As just established, the need for specificity shows up as well due to the wide array of stereotypes, expectations, and challenges the Twin Cities Hmong community faces from external and internal forces. One of the ways assumptions show up within the Hmong community (as well as outside of it) is through gendered leadership. A handful of the professional female Hmong leaders I interviewed explained how being a woman in a leadership position within the United States is challenging. As they shared, they must simultaneously navigate broader American stereotypes about how all Asian women are 'docile and submissive', while also navigating the traditional assumption within Hmong communities that leadership roles are for men. Unfortunately, outsiders are also complacent in feeding into this narrative of male-leadership through even well-intentioned choices. For example, a couple of my interviewees mentioned that oftentimes non-Hmong individuals who want to work with the Twin Cities Hmong community approach the Hmong community with the understanding that it is a patriarchal society, and thus choose to put a man in a position of power in an attempt to be 'respectful' of the community's cultural values. Even with all the challenges of female leadership, we are also seeing that "more and more Hmong Americans, both men and women, are increasingly comfortable with the idea that Hmong American daughters will lead in capacities that they have historically been excluded from" (Interviewee 13, 2020).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

In the process of living in the Twin Cities, Hmong people are constantly encountering both their community and broader community's expectations of them. For some people, feeling as though others attach negative stigmas to facets of their identity can be difficult and become terms they feel they have to break away from. One person expressed her thoughts on the way the term 'Hmong American' feels stigmatized to her. She explains, "I don't know about other people, but for me, sometimes identifying as Hmong American, it might sound odd, but it makes me feel like other people perceive me in a different way than if I told them that I was just American or Asian American." Attempting to analyze her feelings further, she explains, "I guess that there's like a negative stigma attached to refugee Asian communities like Karen and Hmong for example. Like we are uneducated, our families are abusive, you know, domestic violence -- things like that. And I guess that impacted me negatively when I identify as Hmong American because that's not how my family is or that's not how every single family in the Hmong community is. And so just breaking through those negative stigmas" (Interviewee 10, 2020).

Other assumptions people face are related to feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. One interviewee explains that the assumptions start with physical appearance, that "you look different" and then people sometimes think that you don't speak English because of how you look. Recognizing this feeling of difference, one interviewee expressed the feeling that although he always tries his best, "You always feel that you're a second-class person...Even if going to a shop or going to a different part of town, you always feel that vulnerability within you that you're different. And maybe that's just me, but I think most people will feel kind of the same way," (Interviewee 6, 2020).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Along these same lines, the physical appearance aspect is one extremely common way assumptions regarding one's identity start. For a handful of the people I interviewed, many shared that they 'present' as East Asian, or that they have been told 'they don't look Hmong,' even by other Hmong people. By appearing East Asian, many people expressed that automatically a lot of East Asian stereotypes are placed on them -- notably ones they feel don't apply to them. One of the Hmong college students I interviewed shared a story about trying to explain to her Chinese friend about the importance of affirmative action, and also found herself having to explain the ways Hmong people are not like Asian stereotypes. She explains.

"I was trying to explain to her, you know, there are East Asians, Southeast Asians, and South Asians, and especially Hmong people for example do not fit those regular Asian stereotypes of 'they're super good at math.' You know, just being that model minority, [and] that model minority myth really does not apply to Hmong people. I really don't think so. And so, it's hard to try to explain that Hmong people aren't like a lot of Asians...I think that especially comes if you're trying to explain where Hmong people are from. A lot of people will be like, 'Oh, which country are your parents from?' and I'm like my parents were born in Laos, but they're not Laotian...They're Hmong. And then I have to go into this whole history, lecture and everything." (Interviewee 8, 2020).

In this way, the ways other people see you because of physical features also becomes a way identities are pushed onto individuals or assumed even when they are not applicable. And the act of having to respond to those assumptions becomes a way through which people interact with the world on a daily basis.

c. Sense of Belonging

The aspect of needing to constantly explain who you are, as if to justify and claim your place in the world, connects to ideas of belonging which are important to discussing

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

identity. Sense of belonging shows up in various ways, particularly when it is lacking. Not feeling like you belong connects to constant feelings of inferiority, feeling like a foreigner or having to prove your identity -- especially as an American. One person I interviewed described just how complicated being an American can be. She explains,

“Although I am a naturalized citizen, I know that being an American citizen comes with protections and status. But at the same time, you have that sense of never really belonging in this country as an American because no matter where you go you face the microaggressions of being a perpetual foreigner. And so, you’re always having to prove that you are an American. You know something as benign as like you understand the holidays, understand the different religious practices, and know how to operate at work within that white structure or white culture.” (Interviewee 9, 2020).

Others occasionally see this same feeling of not fully belonging among Hmong youth as well. One adult interviewee describes that he’s “seen it firsthand,” where Hmong youth won’t join extracurriculars or sports “because they struggle with their identity, because they have a sense of inferiority, the sense they may not be good enough, the sense that they might be outsiders. Well, whatever the reasons, they are all tied to identity,” (Interviewee 4, 2020). These struggles with belonging point towards the larger structure of racialized life in the United States. Interviewee 9 looks towards the struggle she faced navigating between different ways of seeing herself and her racialized existence in the United States from an early age. She explains that she knew she was a racialized early on, pointing toward an early memory of her around five years old when somebody called her a chink. Yet she goes further to elaborate:

“I live[d] that double existence where I would go to school and forget that I was a racialized person -- like I would forget that I was Hmong until somebody would bring it up to me that I was like somehow a chink. They would always use the word ‘chink’ at that time you know. ‘Chink’ or ‘Asian’ to make fun of me. It was almost like a *dual identity*. Like sometimes as a kid... I would even walk around the world as a white person or something because I forgot that my skin was brown and that...I look like

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

an Asian person you know. But then all of sudden you walk into a situation and then you realize “Oh my god, no, I’m not white.” (Interviewee 9, 2020)

These racialized experiences appear particularly frequently if people work or attend schools at predominantly white institutions.

Belonging also becomes a more complicated issue when we consider the ways people may feel like they don’t belong within the larger Hmong community. As

Interviewee 15 explains,

“People aren’t necessarily physically harming queer and trans people, but they might be ex-communicated or excluded or displaced from our community so that those young people feel a loss of connection. And I think what’s really important to recognize is the Hmong people really love community, and they really love being together, and they really love celebrating and...we’re really proud to be Hmong. And I think when you’ve had that severance of the connection to your Hmong identity... sometimes what happens is that they kill themselves, right? That’s a form of violence too, is to exclude and bar certain people from being part of your community.” (Interviewee 15, 2020)

With this discussion around belonging, it becomes difficult when people feel as though they must pick certain aspects of their identity and erase other aspects to ‘belong’ in the community. Interviewee 15 explains that: “There’s a lot of young queer and trans Hmong youth who feel like their only option into being accepted in and being seen in their queerness is to reject their Hmong identities because they feel like their Hmongness, or their Hmong community rejects them.” However even this rejection of one aspect of identity is not as simple, because the queer and trans community broadly speaking is very white-centered which can make even those spaces difficult to be seen in. Reconciling these conflicting ideas for themselves, Interviewee 15 explains that, “I’m always navigating with young people the conversation that neither of these cultures is perfect or better than the other. We get to take all the good parts of what these cultures have given

us and allowed us to be, and we get to reject the parts of our culture that don't accept us as whole humans, right?"

d. Intergenerational Conflict, Assimilation, and Identity

In considering the current lived experiences of Hmong in the Twin Cities, intergenerational conflict and assimilation issues cannot be overlooked. Interviewee 3 explains that he was just a little kid when his family arrived here, and "So, for me, it was all about just learning English, learning how to be American, learning how to be integrated with my surroundings, and so it wasn't really challenging myself to be Hmong in the situation. It was really just challenging myself to be more American." (Interviewee 3, 2020). Here, he expresses that just to get by in the United States, and perhaps find a space of belonging for himself, he had to focus on assimilating to American culture.

Similarly, considering the difficulty of preserving culture and community across forced migration and various settlements, among the people I interviewed there was a lot of expression of the difficulties the Hmong community has faced and continues to face trying to preserve their culture as they become more assimilated or Americanized. For example, Interviewee 3 explains that, "When you become American you become American, and your ethnic part kind of dies away slowly." In this way, there is a lot of pain and struggle within the Hmong community attempting to find a balance in which they can sustain themselves and their culture while also continuing to adjust to and thrive in the US.

A further example of difficulties navigating identities in assimilation relates to history and how people understand their own history. One of the people I interviewed

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

explained how since they had grown up in the U.S. and had learned American history in school, sometimes when they are asked about history, they first think about American history because that is what they learned even though it does not directly connect to their own people's past. Overall, this intergenerational conflict and assimilation issues as reflected in these examples depicts that history is difficult and, depending on context and experience, unique to different individuals for each individual has different experiences they remember, identify with, or have formally learned.

Thus, with conversations of assimilation and intergenerational differences, it is also key to consider how Hmong in the Twin Cities understand and identify themselves. Through my survey collection, I asked two questions in particular that resulted in extremely nuanced and thought-provoking answers: (1) What does being Hmong or Hmong American mean to you? and (2) Do you identify more as Hmong or American? Or both?

In considering the first question on what being Hmong or Hmong American meant to survey respondents, there were various perspectives. For some survey respondents, it was important to draw a strong line delineating 'Hmong' and 'Hmong American' because the term 'Hmong American' is an "identity claimed by 2nd generation or mostly U.S.-born" and that this identity is primarily concerned with "social justice issues such as equality and equity." 'Hmong' on the other hand was viewed as an 'identity typically claimed by ethnic Hmong people who don't claim a specific country as their home.' In this way, the emphasis is on statelessness. Others felt that these identities generally represent feelings of "being somewhere between two cultures, both of which are very ambiguous." There was also emphasis placed on being Hmong *American* as a

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

privilege with a geographic basis that also relates to education level. This question also brought up senses of “carrying the legacy of [one’s] family history,” resilience, and uniqueness.

As for whether people identify themselves more as Hmong or American, the majority of respondents were split between identifying more as Hmong versus identifying as both Hmong and American. Two respondents said they identified more as American but did not elaborate on answers. For those who identified as both Hmong and American, it was indicated that these individuals were attempting to balance different aspects of themselves. For a handful of respondents, Hmong represents their ethnicity while American represents their nationality and citizenship status. Others shared that they were born Hmong, but due to living in the U.S. have a more Americanized mindset (moving away from traditional/patriarchal traditions). And others simply stated that how they identified depended on the context they were in and who they were interacting with. Interestingly, those who identified themselves more as Hmong, focused more on heritage and racialized experiences in the US. One respondent shared that they feel more Hmong because “After all, my skin color is not white.” Another respondent said they felt more Hmong because “American has always been associated with White so, obviously I’m not White.”

In this sense, the complicated relationships people have with what terms they use to identify themselves or categorize themselves shows the diversity of perspectives between Twin Cities Hmong individuals, while also pointing towards the various ways people feel like they belong or do not belong within the United States.

Conclusion:

Overall, specific lived experiences are an important aspect to consider in analyzing the social construction of identity. Identifying the people and organizations with power to shape the lives of the larger Twin Cities Hmong community helps provide insight into the ways local lived experiences are changing. We see this for example by observing the evolving role of the clan system and related organizations like Hmong 18 Council in leadership, as well as who else is beginning to step up into those leadership roles. Next, in terms of critically analyzing the lived experiences of Hmong individuals in the Twin Cities, due in large part to the uniqueness of the geographic location of the Twin Cities and the size of the population living here, many Hmong have noticed ways in which their identity can act a form of privilege or put them in positions of power in a breakdown of the social hierarchy. The relatively simple privilege of not having to explain what their Hmong identity is a ‘privilege’ many Hmong individuals attribute with Minnesota as opposed to other places in the United States and even abroad. At the same time, there also exists many stereotypes and expectations Hmong living in the Twin Cities still have to face and reconcile with, as well as ways people must navigate their racialized lives in the United States and their sense of belonging within the community. Importantly though, all of these facets of lived experience in the Twin Cities do not happen in a vacuum. Thus, in the next chapter, we must also consider the ways different networks and interconnections throughout a community and between communities plays into the ways people are able to construct their own identities.

Chapter 4: Relationship Between Twin Cities Hmong Networks and Identity

Personal and collective identities are not created in isolation; instead, networks are a particularly important component to consider in discussions of identity construction. With this context, in this chapter, I explore *how the personal and collective identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities are influenced by various connections and networks through families, kinship, clans, organizations, and other Hmong and non-Hmong inside and outside of the Twin Cities area*. Studying the various ways and reasons why people connect with others of similar or different identities helps shed light on the fluidity of identities and their complexities.

To explore this question, first I look at some of the ways the Hmong community in the United States has formed networks within the U.S. and abroad. Next, I look at the unique channels through which the Twin Cities Hmong community forms networks within the Twin Cities and beyond. Finally, I look at the relationship between the Twin Cities Hmong community and other ethnic communities, grounding this comparison in a discussion of the ‘Asian American’ umbrella category and the ‘model minority myth.’ I argue that Twin Cities Hmong networks are diverse and vary depending on the different scales of the populations being connected. Additionally, networks simultaneously shape Hmong identities and are defined by the identities of those who use those networks. Lastly, through examining Hmong networks, it also becomes clear that individual’s identities can also be shaped by what they are not.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Hmong American Networks in the United States:

One of the most important networks connecting Hmong populations throughout the U.S. are clan and familial networks. These networks are broad but have had a crucial role influencing Hmong populations following their initial migration to the United States. Initially, when Hmong refugees were first being resettled in the U.S., due to the U.S.'s policy of dispersal many Hmong ended up in various cities and states, isolated from their extended relatives and clan leaders. This policy of dispersal was put in place in an attempt to not overwhelm any city or state's support system and under the belief that this would help refugees assimilate as quickly as possible (Xiong, 2016). Instead, many Hmong were understandably unhappy with being located so far away from their family members and community. As a result, secondary migration processes occurred years later as finances allowed, in which families resettled themselves in different parts of the U.S. to be closer to their relatives (Ng, 2008). This secondary migration process is what allowed for different Hmong hubs and concentrations to develop -- including the Twin Cities, which is notable for having the largest urban concentration of Hmong in the U.S., as well as other popular centers such as California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

Even prior to migration to the U.S., leadership has been a powerful means of connecting Hmong community. General Vang Pao and his leadership is one of the most important examples of this. General Vang Pao did not acquire his authority in the traditional sense through the clan system. Instead, his authority was bestowed upon him and legitimized through his role in the military and by outsiders such as the French and the Americans (Vang and Hein, 2015). Despite this, General Vang Pao played a powerful role unifying the Hmong community in Laos across clan lines. Additionally, after coming

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

to the U.S. in 1975, he also represented life as it used to be in Laos as he was fifty-five years old by the time he arrived in the U.S. and consequently was a part of the older generation that had detailed memories of Laos. In this way, General Vang Pao has also been viewed as symbolically tying the Hmong American population to the Hmong population in Laos due to his personal lived and remembered experience from there -- which younger generations might not know. Thus, his passing on January 6, 2011, has been seen as the marking of the end of a historical era for Hmong Americans, specifically because they have lost part of what symbolically and directly connected them to Laos as the older generations have died out (Vang and Hein, 2015).

Another way through which Hmong in the United States have maintained their connections with Hmong in other countries is through Hmong American-led protests. This is because many of the grievances Hmong Americans have expressed through their protests have been directed at the Laos and Thai governments where many Hmong Americans initially migrated from as refugees. These protests then become a way for Hmong Americans to connect and show solidarity with other Hmong people located back in Laos and Thailand, or in the ‘homeland’, especially because so many Hmong Americans “still maintain mutually, interdependent relationships with their ethnic compatriots who “fell or were left behind (*poob rau tom qab*) in Laos and Thailand” (Xiong, 2016). These relationships are maintained along clan and lineage lines, and the protests more broadly reflect solidarity with other Hmong in the diaspora, similarly mirroring ongoing exchanges between Hmong Americans and Hmong in the homeland through media communication and letters that have been sustained since initial migration to the U.S. following the war. As Xiong (2016) explains, “Hmong’s protests in the United

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

States against foreign governments or against U.S. foreign policies reflect their concerns for the wellbeing of other Hmong abroad and for their ongoing mutually, interdependent relationships with them.”

In this way, Hmong networks throughout the United States can take on various forms; from widespread familial networks that have the potential to determine where Hmong people move geographically in the US as well as physically create large concentrations of Hmong in certain places, to more temporary gatherings and mobilization during protests. Notably, the more permanent concentration of Hmong in certain parts of the United States plays a role influencing the ways in which Hmong people understand their personal localized identities in comparison to Hmong communities in other parts of the United States. For example, comparisons can be made between people who live in the more urban and dense Twin Cities, versus the more rural and spread-out communities in California. These comparisons influence how Hmong individuals in different communities see themselves. This is because these geographic locations and relationships to them become tied to the ways individuals and larger communities come to understand their own community. Examples illustrate this point include how, as a handful of interviewees pointed out, the Twin Cities Hmong community might view itself as more progressive and ‘advanced’ than Hmong from more rural towns -- especially in considering what job opportunities are available.

At the same time, leadership figures or shared political beliefs for example, provide avenues through which Hmong in different parts of the United States and the world more broadly connect to each other. Although these types of networks may not always be physical and may not necessarily involve face-to-face encounters between

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Hmong from different places, these networks still play an important role contributing to a shared understanding of what it means to be Hmong in the United States. Larger scale networks, in this way, also end up providing a way to counter the oppression, powerlessness and voicelessness Hmong have faced for so many years. At the same time, while political figures may help ensure Hmong voices are heard, it can become “difficult to decipher whether the positions they take truly represent the interests of people in the community or merely the opinions of individual advocates,” (Vang, 2010, p.124).

Twin Cities Hmong Networks:

The Twin Cities Hmong community also has various ways it connects with Hmong throughout Saint Paul and Minneapolis, as well as with the broader Hmong community in the U.S. and internationally. From my survey results, it appears that some of the most consistent ways Twin Cities Hmong interact with other Hmong individuals/communities, inside and outside of the Twin Cities are through family ties, social media (e.g. Facebook), cultural events, and clan or social relationships established in traditional Hmong communities. As to be expected, in our technological age, Twin Cities Hmong have numerous online connections and communities which can be found on social media platforms such as Facebook. One of the people I interviewed outlines the significance of social media and technology in connecting the larger Hmong community.

She explains,

“I see a lot of Hmong groups on social media trying to bridge that gap -- that physical gap between us by using social media. So definitely, I feel like we are pretty connected with each other. I see Hmong people here talking to Hmong people in France, or to Hmong people back in Laos and Thailand. It’s like we’re very connected thanks to social media and technology.” (Interviewee 11, 2020).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Apart from social media, the Twin Cities Hmong is also connected through channels such as shared knowledge and interest in Hmong celebrities and artists, Hmong non-profit organizations, physical gathering locations such as Hmong Village, which is a Hmong shopping center located in Saint Paul, wide-spread family networks, and even academic communities nationally and internationally that research Critical Hmong Studies. However, the specific ways individuals feel connected to the Hmong community vary by individual depending on their own positionality within the Hmong community. For example, Hmong people heavily involved with Hmong organizations may emphasize the role of Hmong organizations as ways to connect with their community, while students may look more towards family networks.

At the same time, it is also important to stress the different ways Hmong people with more specific and unique identities might connect (or not connect) with the Hmong community. Hmong woman, divorced Hmong woman, queer and trans Hmong people, and multiracial Hmong people are examples of identities that can complicate people's relationships with the Twin Cities Hmong community. This is because based on these additional identities, people may feel that some spaces are more or less welcoming to them. One of the queer Hmong people I interviewed helps illustrate how additional identities can complicate relationships with the Hmong community. Reflecting on a conversation where an acquaintance asked them "What keeps you from engaging with Hmong organizing and Hmong movements even more than you do now?" and they said:

"I think a part of [what holds me back] is still like a lot of guilt and shame around the person that I am, and [wondering] if they're actually even going to want to build with me, right. It's like, if they're homophobic, are they even going to want to hear anything that a queer Hmong person is going to want to say? Or will they just disregard me?" (Interviewee 15, 2020).

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Aside from how different personal identities affect how people network within the Hmong community, some of the people I interviewed also expressed the sentiment that the uniqueness of the Twin Cities Hmong community could lead to it being very insular.

One interviewee explained as follows:

“In the Twin Cities, the majority of the Hmong people know each other as they grew up together over the past like 45 years. They have this strong community. You can literally live in the Twin Cities and never interact with white people if you wanted to because you have Hmong restaurants, Hmong mortgage, real estate, shopping centers, banks and so on and so forth...So I think that they created this bubble for themselves where they really do have that Hmong community.” (Interviewee 9, 2020)

In this vein, this perception of how insular the Twin Cities Hmong community is seen both positively and negatively. On one hand, one interviewee felt that the “insulated” nature of the Twin Cities Hmong community made it so that they “have a lot of boundaries around their community so it is hard for people to enter that community” (Interviewee 9, 2020). On the other hand, the same interviewee also explained that the concentrated nature of the Twin Cities Hmong community and resources is what drew them to the Twin Cities -- especially since they had grown up in a different part of the United States where there were not many Hmong people. They explain that,

“...having grown up in a white community, I wasn’t able to speak Hmong very well for a long time, so I really craved that. And so, living in the Twin Cities allowed me that opportunity to learn Hmong again, interact with Hmong, and have Hmong friends. And so, being able to reclaim *that was good -- is good.*” (Interviewee 9, 2021)

Another person I interviewed who had also not grown up in the Twin Cities, but has since lived here for years, explained that they similarly felt they had been drawn to the Twin Cities because of the opportunity it provided them to connect with their Hmongness. He explained,

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

“In high school for me, I was often the only Hmong, the only Asian, in my elementary school, high school, and even college to tell you the truth. So, I didn’t have that experience growing up... And maybe that’s the reason why I wanted to come back to the community and to work with the community so much, because I didn’t have that experience growing up.” (Interviewee 4, 2020)

From here, it is clear that the Hmong experience and sense of community in the Twin Cities can be very different from other places in the U.S. because of the sheer concentration of Hmong in the area, as well as how urban the population is.

As established, the Twin Cities Hmong community itself is exceptionally diverse and exceptionally large which has led to the development of networks *within* the Twin Cities to connect different people together. These networks create shared spaces in which people can come together and interact with their Hmong community and Hmong identity visibly. Some of these spaces like Hmong Village or events like Hmong New Year’s result in helping close any physical distances that may be present by bringing people together in one place. Online platforms like Hmong Facebook pages also make it possible for people to more easily perform their identities online. However, despite the aim of networks to bring Hmong people together, sometimes Hmong people with additional identities may not always feel as welcome in those spaces. This furthers the idea that not all community networks are accessible to everyone and perhaps influences the choices people make regarding their own identities -- for example having to choose between performing their Hmong identity or their own personal identity as it might occasionally conflict with more dominant narratives of what it means to be Hmong.

Twin Cities Hmong Community's Relationship with Other Ethnic Groups:

Lastly, the Twin Cities Hmong community's relationship with other non-Hmong communities is very complex and directly related to struggles the Hmong American community has faced with broad terms like 'Asian American,' as well as the 'model minority' stereotype. Of the people I interviewed, when questioned about their relationship and connection to other Asian ethnic groups, despite a U.S. tendency to lump together all people of Asian heritage, many expressed that they didn't always feel very close to other Asian Americans just because of their shared Asian heritage. In this discussion, there was an emphasis placed on the distance people felt from East Asians especially, and with South Asians to a lesser extent. Many people discussed how there were strong feelings within the Twin Cities Hmong community of East Asians as being very privileged in terms of their access to resources and with how they are viewed by the U.S. as well as by the Hmong community. One of my interviewees claimed, "I think that a lot of Southeast Asian, particularly Hmong people, idolize and romanticize a lot of East Asian. Like that we are the 'bad Asians'" in comparison.

Another interviewee explained the tension between the Hmong community and other East Asian communities in the U.S. is due to differences in background and lived experiences:

"When I look at other Asian groups here in the Twin Cities who don't share that refugee background, I think there's a sense of jealousy there. Because whenever I encounter, like a Korean or a Chinese person, it's like they are so well off -- like they don't have the same struggles that Southeast Asian individuals have. And so, I think there's a certain level of jealousy there, just like "You're so well-off, I kind of wish my community has progressed as far as yours." But I also have this understanding that [they] don't have this refugee background that we do." (Interviewee 11, 2020)

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

This subtle tension and feelings of disconnect between the Hmong community and other Asian communities relates to the 'Asian American' label. Although the concept of 'Asian American' does offer up room for solidarity within a racialized American context, at the same time, it can also erase differences and needs for communities like the Hmong who didn't come to the United States with the same degree of privilege that many East Asian and South Asians did. Additionally, as Lee et. al (2017) explains, Critical Asian American scholars continue to argue that the model minority myth, which positions all Asian Americans as 'model minorities' that have achieved social and economic success through hard work and cultural values, is used as a "hegemonic tool that sustains the myth of meritocracy, silences charges of racial injustice, disciplines Black and Brown communities and masks the struggles faced by Asian American communities." This myth simultaneously sets up Asian Americans against all other ethnic groups and minorities, while also erasing the difference of experiences and needs within Asian American communities, particularly that of recently arriving Southeast Asian refugees like the Hmong (Cha, 2013). Moreover, this myth constructs a hierarchical stratification system within Asian communities -- putting Hmong and other Southeast Asians at the bottom rungs of Asian society.

At the same time, these relationships are complicated, especially in the Twin Cities because the Hmong population here is so large and visible, and also has many established organizations. Due to this, Hmong organizations often end up helping other BIPOC communities by providing and sharing resources and spaces. And although Asian heritage didn't automatically ensure close relations, many of the people I interviewed expressed feeling very connected to the Karen population in the Twin Cities especially

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

because they felt they shared similar refugee backgrounds with them. As my survey data indicated, there was approximately a 50-50 split on whether or not respondents were connected to other non-Hmong ethnic groups in the Twin Cities. Of those who said they were connected to other non-Hmong ethnic groups there was a variety of answers as to what communities people felt connected to: Karen, Nepalese, Somali, Filipino, Vietnamese etc. Conversely, only 4 of 20 respondents said they were connected with other ethnic minorities outside of the Twin Cities, and these connections were based on international friendships or through work and social relations. This survey data seems to support the idea that connectedness with other ethnic groups is not as fleshed out as Hmong-to-Hmong connections.

Thus, these inter-ethnic relationships between Hmong populations and other ethnic groups are shaped by the extent to which individuals feel that their experiences and backgrounds relate to each other. Additionally, oftentimes personal and community identities for Hmong in the Twin Cities are defined in opposition to homogeneous categories or stereotypes. Many of the people I interviewed defined themselves and their communities in contrast to other 'typical' Asian Americans who fit into the model minority stereotype. Here it becomes clear that identities can be shaped by what they are not, and in reaction to dominant society narratives -- even those legitimized by the United States government (as they did with 'Asian American' in the census).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the networks that broadly connect the Hmong population in the United States broadly and the Twin Cities Hmong community specifically, are very multifaceted and complex, and have changed and developed over the years. Clan and

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

family networks were an important motivator for secondary migration processes after initially settling in the United States. Leadership and protests have also historically been ways that the U.S. Hmong population has been able to maintain relations with Hmong in Laos and Thailand -- additionally reflecting how Hmong Americans still feel connected with Hmong in other parts of the diaspora. The Twin Cities Hmong community has many specific and unique mediums through which people are able to connect. However, these connection channels are often influenced by people's personal identities -- making it crucial that we continue to recognize and make space for a diversity of identities and experiences within the Twin Cities Hmong American community itself. Lastly, the Twin Cities Hmong community's connection with other ethnic groups has been heavily influenced by categories like 'Asian American' and stereotypes like the 'model minority myth.' In light of the complexity of studying the relationship between networks and identity for the Twin Cities Hmong community itself, it appears that this is still a field that needs continued research so more stories can be shared and so more knowledge can be created related to this topic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research project, aimed to explore the social construction of identity for Hmong in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. Broadly speaking, identity is a very difficult topic to research and analyze due to it simultaneously being extremely personal and subjective to individuals, while also resulting from the product of various social and collective influences. Additionally, this distinction between individual and collective influences cannot be extracted from each other because of the interconnectedness of these different processes. At the same time, even though we all have our own experiences with identity, one's own experiences does not immediately entitle them to fully understanding other people's identities. In this thesis, I explored the social construction of Twin Cities Hmong identity in relation to three primary themes: (1) history, (2) lived experiences, and (3) networks.

(1) History and Identity

First, I explored the complicated ways through which the experiences and memory of war, migration, and refugee experiences continue to impact and connect to Twin Cities Hmong identity. This research found that there was no uniform way in which individuals and families discussed Hmong history of war. For some families, war was associated with pride and celebration of sacrifice; for others war was simply a common discussion topic due to desensitization around the topic; and for others still, conversations on war were not easily accessible because of an individual's own positioning within their family and immediate community. The fact that there were so many different relationships to war and so many different assertions about how the 'Twin Cities Hmong

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

community' broadly relates to war acts as a window into showing the complicated, multifaceted, and diverse ways people experience the world and understand identities.

Importantly, even with individualized relationships to war, there are also more widespread commonly held narratives about war that permeate throughout the Twin Cities Hmong community. The influence of unquestioned or popular narratives regarding any facet of life is not unique to discussions of war or the Twin Cities Hmong community, however, the specific relationship between the Secret War of Laos is unique to Hmong diasporas out of Laos. On a larger scale, this discussion on critiquing common war narratives is important because it indicates the importance of being critical of practices and traditions generally -- pushing people to consider whose stories are not being shared, who is being excluded from narratives of resilience and celebration, how your own positionality affects your relationship with widespread narratives, as well as pushing you to reconsider how much your consumption and sharing of those narratives feeds into larger systems and structures of colonialism. Through this assertion, I do not mean to make an evaluation on the ways war *should* or *should not* be discussed within Hmong communities. Instead, I aim to highlight the ways in which Hmong individuals are pushing back against popular narratives and emphasize the importance of having this intentional dialogue regarding it.

When we think about people's identities, the concept of intergenerational trauma shows how individuals are not fresh slates who remain unaffected by historic events. Instead, as seen from interviews with Hmong living in the Twin Cities, the trauma your family or community experiences, even if you do not experience it directly can still affect you. It can affect how you understand yourself and the world around you, and how you

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

navigate through it. This is important because it helps show that even as we approach people as individuals, there are larger processes which influences their individuality. Twin Cities Hmong relations with refugee experiences are similarly related. The ideas people develop about themselves based on the community they grow up in or due to the poverty they grow up under has long term impacts influencing how people see themselves.

It is from this perspective that *knowing* your own history or having access to creating and interacting with knowledge about your own community in an active way is important. In the world we live in, with a focus on the United States, there are implicit underlying messages on people's worth and place in the world that are constantly being perpetuated. To some extent, as children we do not have control over how those messages influence us -- whether we internalize euro-centric beauty standards, values, or racism, and how others process deal with the same information. As this research indicates, knowing your history seems to offer an avenue for individuals and communities to fight against dominant values and nations, allowing people to reimagine their own self-worth and identities within the context of a racialized world. Additionally, in line with *knowing* your history, there is also an importance placed on *documenting* it -- which is something various actors throughout the Twin Cities Hmong community are pursuing through various angles.

As mentioned in this chapter, history is important -- especially because of the ways in which it can continue to influence individuals and younger generations' perceptions and values of themselves. However, when we are studying identity, diasporas, and community more broadly, history should not be the sole focus of study.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

This is because only looking at history can end up contributing to ‘perpetual refugees’ notions which confines people to the past instead of recognizing everything they are doing and impacting in the present.

(2) Lived Experiences and Identity:

Next, I analyzed the relationship between urban lived experiences and identities in the Twin Cities. In order to give proper consideration to the actors that play a role in shaping and influencing broader Twin Cities Hmong lived experiences, I analyzed some of the Twin Cities decision makers -- noting how over the years, following assimilation processes to the U.S., those with decision power have shifted slightly. Initially, the Hmong clan system and clan leaders were the automatic deferred voice of power and decision within the Hmong community. Although these traditional methods of placing value on clan leaders, elders, and patriarchs continues to this day, the definition of *who* can be in positions of power has been extended. In the context of the Twin Cities today, Hmong-owned or Southeast Asian focused businesses and nonprofits are exceptionally influential in different aspects of people’s lives whether that be from a more cultural or economic viewpoint. There has also been an increase in Hmong political leaders who are representative of the increased voice and visibility of Hmong people in the political sphere. Hmong academic scholars play a role in directing knowledge production on Hmong American populations, as well as educating others. Notably, there has generally been an increase in female leaders and having Hmong women in positions of power. Despite these varying actors influencing Twin Cities Hmong community and identity, significantly, individuals and families are often the level at which decisions are made --

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

recognizing the agency people hold even amidst various actors with influence. The various people and organizations with leadership and decision-making roles in the Twin Cities further points towards the diversity and complexity of lived experiences in the Twin Cities.

In line with lived experiences, I also looked a bit more deliberately, analyzing the specific ways lived experiences relate to how people perceive themselves and understand their place within the context of larger communities and within other identities.

Interestingly, pointing towards the Twin Cities unique urbanized location, Hmong are perceived as holding a lot of privilege and power within the area. Firstly, part of this privilege is attributed to non-Hmong knowing who you are and not having to constantly explain and fight for recognition of your own identity. This is because there is high visibility and a large amount of Hmong in the Twin Cities specifically and within the Midwest broadly which has created an environment where Hmong experiences and identity are relatively common knowledge. This element of not having to explain your belonging or your lineage in more words than a nationality, is a 'privilege' many do not even think twice about. There is potential that this component of not having to explain oneself relates more broadly to the experiences of ethnic minorities within the United States. Many ethnic minorities find comfort among others of similar identities because of shared experiences, and because of how having shared backgrounds can validate experiences without you having to fight for your experiences to be seen by or make sense to 'dominant' society. Although these experiences are different -- there are parallels that can be seen here as well.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Privilege and power also show up because of the ways in which having an active and established community of Hmong has allowed for more resource mobilization within Hmong communities to help others, as well as access to power. It is interesting to consider how a concentrated ethnic community that would be numeric minorities if dispersed, are able to gain a stronger voice and perhaps stronger sense of community identity by living in more concentrated areas. This also points towards the need for dual understandings of identity -- recognizing that how identities operate at one scale do not always transfer to other scales. The privilege Hmong hold at a Twin Cities level may not be as applicable to a national scale because they might not be as visible to others at that scale.

In terms of lived experiences, for Hmong there are also a handful of stereotypes and expectations that come with living in the United States as a racialized person of color broadly, and as a group who is automatically lumped with 'Asian' stereotypes. For example, many Hmong female leaders must simultaneously navigate struggles of being 'Asian' in society, while also dealing with the more directly patriarchal aspect of Hmong society and the expectations imposed on that end. Just as identities overlap and intersect, stereotypes and assumptions can as well. In this context, it might mean having female Hmong leaders facing patriarchal assumptions from broader society as well as from Hmong community at the same time. Rather than simplifying the issue, it complicates it when you are dealing with expectations that are similar but not the same. This struggle is representative of broader difficulties with navigating different identities -- particularly because there is no clean overlap from one identity to the next.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Daily lived experiences also include dealing with perceived negative stigmas. Regardless of whether or not others (Hmong or non-Hmong) see these negative stigmas, for Hmong who do, these are still feelings and perceptions they must navigate on a daily basis. The weight it occupies on one's mind is valid. Similarly, this relates to a broader sense of belonging. How people live and how comfortable they are in the spaces they occupy further connects to these notions of belonging. It is particularly painful when people feel rejected from a place they feel ready to call home, and this rejection stems from the work others intentionally or unintentionally do to create places where others similar or different from them do not 'belong.' This is reflective of how regardless of individual self-perception, our personal identities and sense of belong can still be affected by others.

These issues are further complicated when people are trying to make sense of their own space of belonging and navigating 'two worlds' (e.g. 'Hmong' vs. 'American' or 'traditional' vs. 'modern'). One way, the complexity of the way people navigate worlds is demonstrated is how people decide to label themselves, how people react to externally placed labels, and how they decide to interact with them based on their own perspectives and experiences. From here it shows that identities can be influenced by externally constructed and placed labels, and at the same time, the ways we take on labels relate to our own personal identities.

(3) Networks and Identity

Lastly, I examined the ways networks both inside and outside the Twin Cities with other Hmong and non-Hmong communities can shape people's individual and

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

collective identities. Networks are important because of the way they further recognize that identities are never constructed in a vacuum -- importantly too, networks can exist at various scales and can be seen between various communities. First, there are broader Hmong American networks that connect Hmong communities through the United States as well as internationally. These networks can look like clan and familial ties, widely revered political leaders like General Vang Pao, or even protests happening across the country. These different types of networks can have different influences -- physically connecting people to allow people to interact and create community directly; or more abstractly creating conceptions of Hmong community and identity broadly through shared values (e.g., protesting against government corruption); or linking people internationally in shared solidarity and recognition of struggle. Ultimately, these show how even widespread networks play a significant role in influencing identities.

Next, there are various ways through which the Twin Cities Hmong community connects to itself as well as to other Hmong communities. Some of these avenues include social media, organizations, celebrities, Hmong shopping centers etc. The specific avenues people use to connect relate to individuals own positionalities. However, not all networks or spaces equally welcome all people, even within those who identify as Hmong. For example, queer or divorced Hmong people may find spaces where they feel judged and decide not to return to those spaces. The Twin Cities itself can be described as being very insular -- which simultaneously creates borders around the Twin Cities Hmong community while also being one of the key points attracting others to the community. In this way, networks become ways through which people get to decide how they want to perform and live their identities.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Finally, I look at the relationships the Twin Cities Hmong community has with other non-Hmong communities. This issue is complicated due to the immediate categorization of all people of Asian descent as ‘Asian American’ and the associated model minority myth. This model minority myth becomes a tool to set different ethnic groups against each other while also homogenizing the differences between groups. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no immediate ‘Asian’ connection that brings the Hmong community in closer relation to other Asians. Instead, there is more of an emphasis of finding community in other communities with similar refugee immigrant experience. In the case of the Twin Cities that includes the Karen population. Ultimately, identities are complex and can be shaped by what they are not and shaped actively against dominant narratives or imposed labels.

Limitations and Current Relevance:

Although this research was able to provide a nuanced and critical analysis of Twin Cities Hmong identity, there are limitations of this research that need to be reiterated. Firstly, by the nature of how the first-person interviews were conducted, the majority of people I interviewed with were second generation (born in the United States to foreign-born Hmong parents) or first generation (born abroad). However, many of the first-generation Hmong individuals I interviewed can also be classified under the 1.5 generation category which refers to people who were born abroad but moved to the United States in their childhood. Thus, the greater majority of people I interviewed were people who have lived in the United States for most of their lives. This of course is not a problem especially because these interviews represent the younger generations' lived

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

experiences in the United States and incorporate very complicated relationships regarding identity, community, and belonging that need to be studied. However, it is important to recognize the positionality of the majority of the people I interviewed. Since most of my interviewees were younger, ranging from college students to working professionals, and all of them spoke English fluently, this research project is not able to fully capture the experiences and thoughts of older generations when it comes to their own conceptualizations of personal and collective identities. Interviewees of course shared tangentially some of the experiences the elders held that they observed which is important for this research, however, it of course does not compare to a more full analysis of the direct thoughts and experiences older generations have regarding how their identity relates to history, lived experiences, networks. Interviewing older generations would also have contributed to more perspectives on the ways the 'homeland' can be understood and relationships with it.

In the current context, this research continues to be vital for various reasons. When we think about identity, one of the important takeaways is the need for specificity. This is because extremely broad terms like 'Asian American' and even 'Hmong American' can erase less dominant voices even within those terms. Just as the term 'Asian American' can lead to the upholding of East Asians and South Asians as model minorities at the expense Southeast Asians who arrived as refugees, the term 'Hmong American' can also be homogenizing if it isn't used with the understanding that people who can be encompassed under that term can be vastly different from each other. Even with recognizing the importance of specificity, there is also still value in using terms like 'Asian American' and 'Hmong American.' Such categorizations do provide the

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

opportunity to build solidarity across differences as long as we are cognizant and intentional of not using these terms to uphold some dominant voices at the expense of more ‘marginalized’ ones or erase differences. In the context of the present day, in which we have seen rising anti-blackness and anti-Asian hate crimes, there is immense need for building solidarity and mutual support.

From this in-depth analysis, it becomes clear that there is no singular answer on the ways the collective and personal identities of Hmong in the Twin Cities are constructed. However, this analysis makes sense because, as depicted through this research, even with terms like ‘Asian American’ that do hold the potential for solidarity across ethnic groups, there is still a need to be specific and ensure that you are not using these terms to homogenize and erase across differences. Similarly, even with the term ‘Hmong American’ and ‘Hmong in the Twin Cities’ we have to be careful about generalizing across the vast diversity of people who fit into these categories. Although there are certainly some unique aspects related to how identity is constructed for Hmong populations in the United States, and there is more uniqueness in the ways Hmong identity has been constructed in the Twin Cities due to its urban location and large, dense Hmong population, still there are differences within the Hmong community itself that should not be erased or overlooked. This diversity includes people of different ages, people’s gender or sexuality, education level, when people moved to the United States (under what political climate), how long they have lived in the United States, where else they have lived, how they ended up in the Twin Cities, and their professions just to name a few.

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

Ultimately this research demonstrates that there is no single way to discuss identities, no single way to quantify them or compare them, no single way to categorize them. Identities mean different things to different people -- they are simultaneously exceptionally personal and subjective, as well as heavily influenced by historical events, cultural identity and community. This multitude of identities we can refer to as 'contested identities' because of the ways through which these identities are not always in unison.

In terms of moving this research even further, I also want to highlight how further research on the social construction of identity for Hmong in the Twin Cities also opens up the potential to interconnect Asian diaspora research with urban sustainability research. I bring this up because specifically researching the impacts of history and memory on identities of mobile communities is important because it takes into account differences in identities across generations and how identity construction might change over time, and consequently connects to a community's ability to sustain itself long term. Understanding the different factors which influence a community's identity helps foster more understanding and awareness of other communities and ensures that people's experiences and identities are being centered when we approach any initiatives for development or urban sustainability that we might want to implement moving forward. In this way, an interconnection between Asian diaspora research and urban sustainability research can help identify and frame community needs that might otherwise be ignored. However, even in a more isolated context of continued scholarship regarding Hmong identity, there is room for more research.

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Appendix

Interview Questions:

Topic: Living Experiences and Identity

- How are you involved with the Hmong community in the Twin Cities?
- Who are the people who make decisions for the Twin Cities Hmong community?
- How has being Hmong American influenced your daily life in the Twin Cities?
 - How do you feel your identity as Hmong American benefits you?
 - What are some of the challenges you have faced being Hmong American in the Twin Cities?
 - What are the implicit or explicit stereotypes, assumptions or expectations of Hmong Americans that influence your daily encountering in the Twin Cities?

Topic 2: History and Identity

- How is the Hmong memory/history of war discussed within your family and your community nowadays?
- How does the Hmong American refugee experience have an impact today on you, your family and the Twin Cities Hmong Community?
- To what extent does the history of war, displacement and migration influence your own personal identity and the identity of your community?
 - In other words, how does *history* change your own perception about yourself and Hmong Americans' perception of their people?

Topic 3: Networks and Identity

- To what extent are you connected with different Hmong groups/communities inside and outside of the Twin Cities, across the United States, and internationally?
 - Why and how do you connect? (For what purpose, through what channels?)
 - How do you feel you and your living experience are different from or similar to these Hmong groups?
 - By connecting to different groups in different places, how does it change your own perception about yourself, your family and your own immediate community?
- What are your and the Hmong community's relationships with other Asian ethnic groups both in and outside the Twin Cities, such as Chinese, Laos, Thais, Cambodians and Vietnamese?
 - To what extent does your encountering with other Asian groups change how you perceive yourself, your living experience, and your immediate community in the Twin Cities, and how?

Survey Questions:

Hmong in the Twin Cities Diaspora Experiences and Identities Survey 2020

Thank you so much for volunteering to participate in this research project! Please read the following and click 'I agree' to participate and take this survey.

This study is being conducted by: Anisha RajBhandary, senior, Geography and Asian Studies department, arajbhan@macalester.edu. My faculty advisor for this project is Professor I-Chun Catherine Chang, Geography Department, ichang@macalester.edu.

Project Name

Hmong in the Twin Cities: Diaspora Experiences and Personal Identities

Research Introduction

The research project aims to understand how Hmong American's personal identities are socially constructed in the Twin Cities based on various connections to the history and memory of war, the refugee experience of moving across space, family networks and relations, as well as the localized experiences of urban livelihoods.

Procedures

This survey is meant to gather information on Hmong identity in the Twin Cities and contribute to preserving the history of Hmong communities in the Twin Cities, as well as give the opportunity for community members to represent individual voices and experiences towards the benefit of the community. The survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes of your time. There are 21 questions.

Confidentiality and Privacy

All responses will be kept anonymous, except at the end of the survey there will be an option for you to provide your contact information if you are interested in being interviewed on this topic. You can also contact me directly at arajbhan@macalester.edu if you wish to be interviewed.

The specific records of the study will be kept private, and I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject in any paper or presentation I make based on this research. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

*** Required**

"By clicking agree, I acknowledge that I have carefully read through and agreed to the policies and procedures outlined above. I also understand I can contact the researchers at any time if I have questions or concerns." This project is approved by the Social Studies Institutional Review Board (SSIRB) by Macalester College. *

I agree

I disagree

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

A. Demographic Information

1. Please select your age: *

- 18 to 25 years old
- 26 to 30 years old
- 31 to 45 years old
- 46 to 65 years old
- Older than 65 years old

2. Please select your gender identity: *

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

3. Which generation of Hmong American are you? (The different generations categories listed below are based on the US Census Bureau's definitions) *

- 1st generation (If you are foreign born)
- 2nd generation (if you have at least one foreign born parent)
- 3rd generation or higher (if both of your parents are U.S. born)
- Other: _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

4. Were you born inside the US? *

Yes, I was born inside the US

No, I was born outside the US

5. How many years have you lived in the US? *

Your answer _____

6. How many years have you lived in the Twin Cities? *

Your answer _____

7. What Twin Cities neighborhood or community do you live in?

Your answer _____

8. Which clan do you belong to?

Your answer _____

9. What languages do you speak? *

Your answer _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

B. Lived Experiences Questions

The following questions relate to your lived experiences in the Twin Cities

10. (a) Do you identify as Hmong or Hmong American? *

Yes

No

Other: _____

10. (b) If 'No' or 'Other' please explain why

Your answer _____

11. What does being Hmong or Hmong American mean to you? *

Your answer _____

12. Do you identify more as Hmong or American? Or both? Please explain. *

Your answer _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

13. In what areas does being Hmong or Hmong American benefit you in your daily life? In other words, how does your identity and background positively affect your access to the opportunities listed below? Please select all that apply. *

- Education
- Job and Employment Opportunities
- Affirmative Action
- Living/Neighborhood/Residential Options and Experiences
- Political Representation/Participation
- Cultural Opportunities
- Community Building
- Social Encounters
- None
- Other: _____

14. In what areas does being Hmong or Hmong American disadvantage you in your daily life? (Please select all that apply) *

- Education
- Job and Employment Opportunities
- Affirmative Action
- Living/Neighborhood/Residential Options and Experiences
- Political Representation/Participation
- Cultural Opportunities
- Community Building
- Social Encounters
- None
- Other: _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

15. Based on what you selected above, can you describe how you have experienced benefits and/or disadvantages by being Hmong or Hmong American in the Twin Cities?

Your answer _____

C. History and Memory Questions

The following questions relate to war, migration, and refugee history or experiences.

16. (a) Have any of the following historical events or processes influenced your family's or your life in the US? Please select all that apply. *

- Vietnam War
- Migration within Southeast Asia
- Migration out of Southeast Asia
- Refugee Experiences in Southeast Asia
- Refugee Experiences in the US
- Migration within the US
- None
- Other: _____

16. (b) Based on your selected answers to the question above, please describe how the above historical events have influenced you and your family.

Your answer _____

16. (c) How do the answers you selected influence you and/or your family's daily life nowadays in the Twin Cities specifically?

Your answer _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

D. Network Questions

The following questions relate to various connections and networks inside and outside the Twin Cities area.

17. Do you communicate or interact with other Hmong communities outside of the Twin Cities? *

- Yes
- No
- Other: _____

18. (a) Through what ways do you interact with other Hmong communities/individuals inside or outside the Twin Cities? Please select all that apply. *

- Family ties
- Clan or social relations established in traditional Hmong communities
- Social relations established when seeking asylum
- Social relations established during immigration processes
- Business or work
- School
- Social media (e.g. Facebook)
- News (e.g. radio, television, or newspapers)
- The Arts (e.g. music, dance, poetry)
- Cultural events
- Phone or email
- Other: _____

18. (b) What are the major purposes of the connections you selected above?

Your answer _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

19. (a) Are you connected with other ethnic minority groups in the Twin Cities?

Yes

No

Other: _____

19. (b) If 'Yes' you are connected to other ethnic minority groups in the Twin Cities, please briefly describe which groups and why.

Your answer _____

20. (a) Are you connected with other ethnic minority groups outside the Twin Cities?

Yes

No

Other: _____

20. (b) If 'Yes' you are connected to other ethnic minority groups outside the Twin Cities, please briefly describe which groups and why.

Your answer _____

HMONG IN THE TWIN CITIES

21. (a) Through what ways do you connect with other minority groups inside or outside the Twin Cities? Please select all that apply.

- Family ties
- Clan or social relations established in traditional Hmong communities
- Social relations established when seeking asylum
- Social relations established during immigration process
- Business or work
- School
- Social media (e.g. Facebook)
- News (e.g. radio, television, or newspapers)
- The arts (e.g. music, dance, poetry)
- Cultural events
- Phone or email
- Other: _____

21. (b) How often do you connect with other minority groups inside or outside of the Twin Cities through the ways listed above?

- Daily
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

Last Thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to add, emphasize or feel this survey missed?

Your answer _____

Are you willing to be interviewed further via phone, email or video call? (If yes, please leave your contact information on the page *)

Yes

No

Other: _____

If yes, please leave your contact information below, or reach out to me at arajbhan@macalester.edu

Name

Your answer _____

Email address or phone number

Your answer _____