

# The Channel

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## Introduction

In this issue, we bring to you two unique articles, written by Mr. DinhVanLo, President of the ThaiDam American Friendship Society (SOTAF) and Vice President of Programming for NAFEA, tell the story of the ThaiDam people through his eyes and experiences.

*"A refugee by birth, a human by nature and a Thaidam by race, I faced the world."*

The articles provide both historical background and personal reflections on challenges, obstacles, hopes he has seen and continues to see the ThaiDam face here and in Southeast Asia.

Mr. Dinh Van Lo came to the United States in 1976 and resettled in Des Moines, Iowa where 90% of the ThaiDam now live. He says that Des Moines was the one place where

their prayers for a safe haven were initially heard and it has now become the TaiDam's village.

*"As a member of a small ethnic group in Southeast Asia whose plight earned us the title, 'professional refugees', I carry with me a commitment and dedication working to promote human rights and social equity for all peoples."*

Among many other things, Mr VanLo is a community liason promoting human rights and coordinating family-school-community partnership projects; an advisor and summer youth counselor, Director of the Title VII project for the Des Moines Independent School District and has done extensive cross-cultural counseling and training. Of the three articles (one for next issue) written he says:

*"I wrote the following articles years ago! My philosophy, my commitment and my faith are still unchanged. My hopes and goals for the future are to do the best I can to help my people, our people and the people in need. We depend on each other to strive for the future of our people. As a refugee since birth, I can tell you that I am still very arrogant about being a Thaidam. However, I also am very proud of being the citizen of one of the greatest nations on earth, the United States of America. I am now an arrogant Thaidam-Asian American. (Eh!! Maybe it is too much. You be the judge. Thank you!!)"*

Leslie Turpin, the Editor

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## **IN SEARCH OF THE PROMISED LAND**

By Dinh Van Lo

Life is full of surprising unexpected events and circumstances. We have been to many places and have experienced a lot of suffering and pain. Many questions have been asked as we have these experiences. "Where are our elders? Where are our youth? Where is our people's place in this world? And where do we go from here?"

### **Refugees**

On the run from the valley of Sonla and Dien Bien Phu to the cities of Hanoi and Da Lat via the province of Xieng Khouang to the city of Vientiane, we were fighting, running, struggling, hurting and more hurting because of the war. We also have been preaching, hoping and dying for peace and for opportunities for our children and their children to come.

Constantly, we have been building; We have been packing our few belongings to move on, and we have been rebuilding again. Some have even called us professional refugees because of the many times that we have been displaced.

In Laos for 20 years we started our families, our communities and our villages. We lived peacefully with our Laotian brothers. We experienced sad and happy moments in our lives, but we always continued on our daily routine of living for the sake of tomorrow.

Once again in 1975, we had to pack our few belongings, and we had to start a new journey toward the unknown, the Refugees Camp of Nongkhai, Thailand. We had only hope and faith of being God's children to be our comfort.

In Nongkhai's Camp we slept under tents, on the ground and under trees with stars as our lights and hopes. The dead were our neighbors. About our future, we did not know: We did not have time to worry about it. What has been constant on our mind were,

“What would be on our next meal? What dangers would we have to fight off to survive? What would we have to do to guide our youth towards the right future? What would we need to do to keep getting up after we fall down?”

### **The Promised Land**

The countries of France, The United States, Australia, England, China, Germany, Canada and other free nations heard our cries and our prayers. We were allowed to depart from the Refugee Camps where we had known hunger, hopelessness, uncertainty and fear to our new destination, to the "Promised Land"!

In the United States of America, once again, we faced a new unknown future. A future where some of us were separated from our families, from our friends, and from our known "safe" environment. The suffering that we had been subjected to for so long had become part of us. Now, here in this promised land, we were told to find our own freedom, opportunities, and happiness for our children. Many people cried with joy and sorrow.

The first year when we arrived in our adopted country, we were once again subjected to indignity. The first group that came to Iowa, were rounded up at Camp Dodge. The names of each sponsors were called out loud followed by the names of the refugees they were to sponsored. In small groups, we were herded and led outside of the compound to meet the strangers who would be our helpers for the first year.

Many cried and worried about where we would be in this strange land. Arriving at the apartments or houses that had been rented in advance by our loving and friendly sponsors, we started to feel the joy of having food and physical security. But, emotionally we were still melancholy and homesick. We didn't know where to locate our friends and relatives who had come to the United States of America with us. So the first priority on our agenda was to find our loved ones.

Our first few years went by amidst the experiences of frustration and confusion, of culture shock and alienation, of economic hardship and discrimination, of fears for the safety of the relatives left behind and the constant anxiety of trying to bring them in this country at all cost. But they were also the years of recovery, of discovery, of joy, of enthusiasm, and of being proud of oneself again.

### **The Year of 1988**

Suddenly the 80's are here! Many of us have been in this country more than ten years! But many of our friends and family members are still scattered all over the world! We are confronted with new obstacles and new problems. We begin to realize that it will be hard to maintain our lives and our families. Our whole family structure and society have been turned "upside down".

## **Our Elders**

Our elders who had always made recommendations and decisions are being ignored and dismissed. Our elders who used to be respected and honored, are being pushed aside, forgotten in a corner with no way out! Many of our elders begin to lose the sense of belonging, the sense of security, the sense of togetherness, the sense of being respected and thus, their will to live. Most cannot go anywhere because they cannot drive, because they cannot speak the language and because they don't know where to go. Their dignity and wisdom seemed to have been lost on the way across the ocean to the third country of adoption.

What a sad feeling to see some of our elders in a nursing home with no one to talk to, to understand and to relate to when they need it. What a pity to experience the death of a rich tradition of respect, of caring, of valuing and of honoring the elders. It seems as if many of our elders are waiting to die a slow death without honor and dignity.

Our elders' wills to live, now, are perhaps lingering on the hope for the future generation through the seemingly successes of their sons, daughters and grand-children. But perhaps also their wills to live lie in the hope of breathing the freshness of freedom, of seeing the beautiful light of the sunshine, of the dreams still fresh in their minds for the hope of the "Promised Land", and of wanting to live to see their offspring. These keep them going on living.

## **Our Youth**

But then the elders' hope in their offspring are also broken. The youth face many problems of their own. The sense of rootedlessness fueled the youth's identity crisis. Stress and frustration contributed to poor mental health. They have little opportunity to learn about and be proud of their cultural heritage. What they learn from the adults is about wars, more wars, hunger, discrimination, prejudice and running away from home.

These youth want to be like "everybody" else. They are trying very hard to learn as much as possible about this country, about the culture, about the language and gestures, so they can be accepted and belong like "others."

Even though they change their names, became friends with "Americans", speak only English, try to forget or ignore their past and the past of their parents, they still cannot find the way to be "100% American."

But alas, being American is more than just Romanizing a name, changing the color of one's hair, speaking fluent English or going out with Americans! No matter what they do, somehow or other they still encounter racism, prejudice, discrimination, being laughed at, or made fun of, and remained caught in the middle of two "conflicting" cultures, the culture of the where they live, and the culture of where their parents were born.

By the same token, our youth cannot be 100% Asian either, even if they wish to. They have never had a chance to have their mother tongue and ancestral heritage being nurtured

and passed on to them. They were never taught as what was systemically taught in schools.

The cultural dance the youth engage in moves from wanting to be Asians only if it gives them an advantage and preferring be American for its implied more personal freedom and less collective responsibility towards relatives and friends.

### **The Year of 1998**

Again, the past decade have gone just as swiftly as the first. Some of us ThaiDam have been in this country for 20 years now. We, who are professional refugees are like uprooted trees. We need to put down new roots to grow new branches, and new leaves to nourish the growing fruit. We must find ways to support our elders and guide our youth.

But what can we do? Where do we go from here? How do we get up and move forward again?

These are still the same questions that we brought along our long and arduous journey. Perhaps these questions can serve as a catalyst for our leaders to come together, both young and old, wise and inexperienced, to join our hands, our heart, to share our thoughts and our commitments for the betterment of our people and all peoples.

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### **NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT**

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

This issue of Channel is being published as we are entering the final phase of preparing for the National Forum on APA Education. Several years ago, the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs (OBEMLA) in collaboration with several other agencies sponsored two Asian and Pacific American Education Forum in Pomona, California, and New York City. Both meetings brought together educators and other service providers to examine the needs of and services to Asian and Pacific American students. In 1998 as we approach the upcoming Census 2000, it has become necessary to re-examine the current educational services to the Asian and Pacific American (APA) communities across the nation. NAFEA in collaboration with OBEMLA and NAAPAE is hosting a National Forum on APA Education on October 2-4, 1998 at CSU Long Beach. We are looking forward to this exciting event and will have much to share with you in our next issue.

It is our earnest wish to be a resource to our members in multiple ways. For this reason, we will continue to highlight the organizations that have showed interest and commitment in serving our Southeast Asian American populations. We begin by sharing two organizations with whom our board members are affiliated. In our last issue we introduced SEARAC - the Southeast Asian Action Resource Center based in Washington, D.C. KaYing Yang, our Vice-President of Fundraising, is the new Executive Director of SEARAC. For this issue we will inform you of an organization that has had a long-

standing involvement in Southeast Asian Refugee resettlement process during the last two and half decades. World Learning is the organization that trained and supplied the majority of English language teachers to the refugee camps throughout Southeast Asia. Currently they are involved in several repatriation efforts worth knowing. Leslie Turpin, our Vice-President of Publication is with the School for International Training - SIT, a division of World Learning.

This CHANEL Issue also features a special Southeast Asian ethnic group - the ThaiDam in the U.S. Dinh Van Lo, our Vice-President of Programming is the current President of the Society of ThaiDam American Friendship - SOTAF. Although ThaiDam is an ethnic group within our Southeast Asian constituency, it has received little recognition because of our own limited understanding of its history. The intriguing and informative stories written by Dinh will help us bridge this gap of knowledge. I am hoping to see many of our friends at the National Forum on APA Education.

warmly,  
KimOanh Nguyen-Lam

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## **A UNIQUE EVENT: "THANK YOU, AMERICA" GALA**

The Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC) is organizing a Gala to be held on Sunday, November 8, at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. The event will mark the admission of more than 1.5 million Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugees to this country, celebrate their accomplishments, and pass the torch to the new generation of Southeast Asian American leaders. Recognition will be given to prominent figures who have contributed to the refugee cause, including the Presidential Award and Congressional Award, and awards to Southeast Asian American organizations, Volags, and Foundations.

"The Gala will be an opportunity for the community to honor key people who opened the doors for refugees into the United States," said SEARAC's Executive Director, KaYing Yang. "Equally important, we will showcase the contributions that Southeast Asian Americans have made to this country."

For information, contact:

SEARAC Gala Coordinator  
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Washington DC 20009-3099  
Phone: 202/667-4690  
Fax: 202/667-6449  
E-mail: [searacdc@aol.com](mailto:searacdc@aol.com)  
Website: [www.searac.org](http://www.searac.org)

Because of its special significance, this "Thank You, America" Gala will be unique in the history of Indochinese refugees. It is estimated that 500 people will attend the reception, banquet and awards ceremonies, including members of the Administration and Congress,

prominent refugee supporters from the private sector, and members of the refugee communities.

Tickets are \$150, and tables are \$1,500. Purchasers of tables will be featured in the souvenir program booklet. A limited number of student tickets at \$75 and individual tickets at \$100 are available. The reception will begin at 5:30 p.m., and the banquet and awards ceremonies will begin at 7:00 p.m.

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## **Minutes of Lao Ethnic Studies**

98' NAFEA Conference  
Houston, Dallas  
May 8-9, 1998

\* Submitted by Samlong Inthaly, Vice-President of Programming

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Three ethnic groups participated in the conference, namely Lao, Hmong, and Thai Dam. All the ethnic groups coming from Laos are considered Lao nationals, and we Laotians always recognize our ethnic diversity. In the past, Lao ethnic studies were normally organized as one single group. This year it was organized slightly differently, based on a response to NAFEA's call for a paper by a Lao group to present a proposal for a Lao national organization in the United States as no Lao organization currently exists at the national level. In light of the ethnic-specific nature of the topic, the other ethnic groups decided that their interests would be better served by breaking out to focus on their own issues and concerns. In effect, Lao ethnic studies was divided into two groups: Lao, and Hmong together with Thai Dam. This report represents only a summary of the Lao group. The Hmong studies session was reported on in the last issue of NAFEA newsletter.

The Lao ethnic studies started out with a general session with all three groups present. We agreed to come back to a general session after two hours of small group discussions to report on our respective group work and reach some form a general consensus.

The Lao studies at the NAFEA conference in Houston were very interesting and productive.

The participants represented parents, community leaders, educators, social workers, students, and business people. They were actively involved in the local community organization and also interested in the national network. Each person in the group had an opportunity to share their personal and professional background and achievements. Dr. Bounlieng Phommasouvanh and Mr. Onsy Inthavong facilitated the discussions. Dr. Bounlieng first presented a rationale and framework of a national organization, called The Lao American National Development and Education Council (LANDEC). LANDEC has 4 objectives as follows:

1. To improve the education of Lao American youth in public schools;

2. To increase the enrollment and graduation rate of Lao American students in institutes of higher education;
3. To increase the level of adult English literacy and improve education for Lao American adults; and,
4. To create cultural centers in local Lao American communities in order to promote cross-cultural understanding and cultural preservation.

An organizational structure was also discussed. Handouts were distributed to the participants to help guide the discussions. The session was highly interactive. The participants expressed strong support for a national organization that would serve as a forum and an advocacy body for Lao people in the United States. They offered many ideas and suggestions for a better organization.

Mr. Onsy then presented the second half of the organization, which dealt with its financing. The organization would be self-supporting, generating incomes from loans to its members. The organization's initial capital would come from its members' shares. This is an outgrowth of a pilot project in Northern California under Onsy's leadership. A concept paper was distributed to the participants to consider, which generated much interest as well as discussion on its implementation on a large scale. It was suggested that another conference be convened with a wider audience to secure broader support and participation sometime soon. As for the specific time and place, it was left to Bounlieng and Onsy to propose later.

The general session of the Lao Ethnic Studies resumed at 4:30. Each group gave a brief report of its work. The session focussed on the networking and coalition of all ethnic groups from Laos at the national level, which was recognized as timely and fundamental. The groups agreed that the national coalition and network could be long-lasting only when each group has a strong sense of purpose and structural foundation within its own community.

The session came to a consensus that we must nurture unity within diversity for all Lao nationals in the United States. To realize this objective, an ad hoc committee was set up to develop a national organization of all ethnic groups from Laos. The members include Kham-One Keopraseuth, Souphap Phonthaasa, Charlie Chang, Neal Thao, Samlong Inthaly, Dinh Van Lo, Andrew Phomthavong, and KaYing Yang. Kaying was volunteered to serve as a coordinating body. The session was adjourned at 7:00 PM.

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## **DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: The Effects of Exposure to Violence and Social Support on Psychological and Behavioral Outcomes Among Khmer Refugee Adolescents**

by Sarah Megan Berthold  
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Welfare  
Senior Research at the Center for Language Minority Education and Research,  
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While exposure to violence has been found to predict mental health problems in Khmer refugee adolescents, few studies on the effects of trauma and exposure to violence on the well-being of adolescents have empirically identified possible moderating variables. This study examined whether social support and family factors (parental traumatization and family conflict) moderate the relationship between exposure to war trauma and community violence and PTSD, depression, and personal risk behaviors among Khmer refugee adolescents.

A cross-sectional survey approach was utilized, and the primary mode of data collection involved face to face interviews of 144 pairs of foreign born Khmer high school students and their parents and/or guardians. Subjects were drawn from the pool of Khmer refugee students enrolled in three metropolitan schools in Southern California.

Results of this study indicated high levels of exposure to war traumas overseas and community violence in the United States. The adolescents were exposed to an average of 44 different types of violent events in their lifetime. One third of the adolescents met the screening criteria for PTSD and nearly two thirds had symptoms indicative of Major Depression. Exposure to community violence in the U.S. significantly predicted PTSD and personal risk behaviors, while exposure to war traumas overseas did not predict any of the outcomes. Social support and family factors did not moderate the relationship between exposure to violence and psychological and behavioral outcomes. However, social support from family and peers did have a significant main effect on the adolescents' level of PTSD, depression, and personal risk behaviors. Implications for planning community and school based prevention and intervention programs and policies for Khmer and other refugee adolescents are discussed.

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## **World Learning: School for International Training and their Involvement in Southeast Asia**

by Leslie Turpin

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*World Learning (formerly the Experiment in International Living) was founded in 1932 as an exchange program whose mission was to create world peace through increased intercultural communication and understanding. In the last 60 years it has grown from an exchange program to include international development work and a graduate school (the School for International Training) which includes language teacher education programs a teacher education research center and programs in intercultural, grassroots and NGO management, conflict resolution and sustainable development. Readers of the Newsletter are probably most familiar with World Learning's involvement in the Consortium.*

## **CONSORTIUM PROJECTS IN LAOS, VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA**

The Consortium ( a collaborative effort between World Learning, Save the Children, and World Education) was created in 1979 in response to the needs of refugees en route to resettlement in the U.S. For 16 years it ran workplace orientation, cultural orientation and ESL programs for refugees in Panat Nikhom, Thailand and Galaang, Indonesia and trained over 350,000 people en route to the US.

In recent years, with the closing of those processing centers, the Consortium has turned its energy to address the issues of repatriation in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

This article describes those repatriation efforts, begun in 1992, as seen through the eyes of Connie Woodberry, World Education's liaison to all Consortium projects. Connie has worked with the Consortium since 1982 and has been involved in shaping the Consortium's mission and project implementation.

As Connie describes the projects currently underway in Southeast Asia, certain themes emerged:

**\* In-Country Skill Development:**

In all projects, the Consortium works to develop the skills and capacities of people living in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In addition, whenever possible, case workers, office managers and other staff are hired from within the country where the project is underway and supported to develop practical skills necessary for their work, but also ones that can be built on and applied elsewhere.

**\* Opening Channels Of Communication:**

In all projects, the Consortium attempts to bring together people with local, district and provincial government offices to increase communication and to enable broad-based, group-developed work plans, resource and expertise sharing.

**\* Providing Models For Working That Can Be Implemented By The Countries Involved In Other Development And Educational Efforts:**

Consortium projects attempt to provide models of effective development and educational training that can be adapted and built on by the countries to create new models and infrastructures.

**\* Assisting Those Who Need Help Most:**

Although the Consortium projects are primarily focused on repatriation, many of them are open to poor, non-repatriates who also need those services (loans, skills development, etc.)

**\* Small Scale And Follow Through:**

Unlike the Consortium projects in Thailand and Indonesia, the current ones are much smaller, more varied and grassroots in nature. What has been important in their success is the commitment on the part of the Consortium to follow-through with each project and provide support that is sustained enough to enable skills and capacities in-country to develop.

These 4 components ran through all of the projects that Connie discussed which helped to highlight some of the core elements of the Consortium's repatriation philosophy.

## **VIETNAM**

In Vietnam the goal of the Consortium effort has been to assist Vietnamese returnees with reintegration into Vietnam while also assisting the local economies in the Delta and central regions of the country. The project operated for five years in 17 provinces: in Can Tho, Soc Trang, Tra Vinh, Minh Hai, An Giang, Ben Tre, Dong Thap, Kien Giang, Vinh Long,

Long An, Tien Giang, Binh Dinh, Binh Thuan, Dong Nai, Khanh Hoa, Phu Yen, and Ho Chi Minh City.

The goals of the initial project were:

- \* to encourage the successful reintegration of repatriated asylum seekers;
- \* to address unemployment issues of both repatriates and the local population;
- \* to sustain economic development through group-based lending; and
- \* to contribute to the economic development of the country as a whole.

The Consortium works in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs.

During this time the Consortium gave over 4 million dollars in loans and trained accountants and caseworkers to manage a revolving guaranteed loan system. When the funding stopped in 1996, as agreed to by Southeast Asian Countries under CPA, the Consortium pleaded for an extension into 1997. Currently the project works only with extremely vulnerable repatriates. This project is funded through March 1999. It is currently not a loan program, but works with immediate needs of destitute individuals (single women with children and individuals who have been unable to get a start because of outstanding debts, etc.).

When Connie describes the successes of the loan project, she talks about impacts on individuals - one man who didn't have quite enough money to work. With his first loan he bought a bicycle with two baskets for coal. He bought and sold coal with his bike until he was able, through a second loan, to buy a motorcycle and a cart to expand his business. "By the time I saw him, he was proud of himself and confident that he could have a productive life."

## **LAOS**

The Consortium has been involved in repatriation activities in Laos since 1992. Currently there are 4 humanitarian assistance programs that the Consortium is working with government officials from Laos to implement. Projects are located in Sayabouri, Xieng Khuang, Luang Prabang, Saravanne, Savannakhet, Huaphan and Vientiane. They include repatriation projects, detoxification programs and a project to assist in areas dense with unexploded land mines.

Xieng Khouang War Victim's Project's purpose is to assist those living in the Xieng Khouang Province in dealing with the large number of unexploded weapons and artillery in that area--one of the highest concentrations of UXOs in the world. The program works to improve the local ability to respond to UXO (unexploded ordinance) incidents and to educate communities (especially young children) about how to identify and avoid unexploded UXOs. The project, funded by USAID and UNICEF, has included revolving loans for war victims to get medical treatment, developing a teacher training curriculum for

UXO prevention safety and an innovative program for assisting local health centers in dealing with accident victims. In the program, doctors, nurses and lab technicians from Vientiane come to work with local doctors and nurses for 3-4 week periods. After they leave they are available for follow-up information and training. This longer-term training model with follow up is now being adopted elsewhere in Laos for other medical training and education issues.

Much of the repatriation work in Laos has been with the Hmong community as many people from Lowland Laos have been able to return to their families. Because the Lao government did not want repatriates to return to the hills, the Hmong were given large areas of land to resettle as communities. The Consortium has been involved in working with Hmong community leaders to facilitate planning those communities to best meet their needs (including work in irrigation, animal husbandry, agricultural assistance etc.).

The detoxification project has also been adopted by the Lao government for use in other areas of the country because of its effectiveness. The program includes, in addition to a 21-day detox program, extensive follow-up and education that involves the whole family. Connie again points to the importance of the follow-up and support as key to the process.

## **CAMBODIA**

The most extensive Consortium in-country project was the CAPE project in Cambodia. This five-year project was started in order to support the Ministry of Education to improve the quality of primary education in Cambodia through teacher training, cluster school development, and capacity building. The project was designed to develop skills and knowledge of teachers and to provide a means for skills, knowledge and resources to be shared and spread so as to help rebuild a nationwide educational infrastructure.

In the beginning years of the project this seemed to be what was happening as participants in the training programs began to spontaneously organize training in their home villages to make accessible what they were learning.

Unfortunately, this project was terminated by the U.S. in 1997 due to the political situation in Cambodia. Currently the Consortium is working on one short-term program that is an offshoot of the CAPE project. The World Bank is funding a small-scale pilot school cluster in Takeo province. The project includes teacher training, materials development, and basic training in classroom management. Connie is hopeful that if successful, the cluster concept will be expanded.

The UNHCR is also funding the Quick Impact Program (QIP) especially for those who fled into Thailand last July and are now returning to Cambodia. These are small-scale quick fixes that are designed to assist repatriates in their economic adjustment. The project runs out of Battambang.

As Connie describes the variety and number of projects she says (with a combination of exhaustion and excitement), "our focus is to try to empower and train the disempowered in Southeast Asia."

Funders for the Consortium projects include; USAID, UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR, The Department of State and private donations.

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## **WHO ARE THE THAIDAM ?**

by Dinh Van Lo

The Thaidam are the least known ethnic group from Indochina. They are called by some "professional refugees" due to their tragic experiences in this century being forced to flee from many wars. They have endured much pain and sorrow, including separation from spouses, children and other loved ones.

Their exodus began in 1283 when their kingdom (the Nan Chao kingdom) was destroyed by the mongol horde of Kubilai Khan, continued in 1954 when the French were forced out of their Tonkin colonies and again in May 1975 when Saigon, South Vietnam fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese communists.

After living in Laos for 20 years, the Thaidam once again sought refuge in Thailand in May 1975. In the refugee camps in Thailand, Mr. Baccam Quy, vice-president of the then Thai federation wrote letter after letter to the leaders of the "free world" stating that:

"...Having been chased for twenty years and several times separated from our homes, and our possessions, we, the Thaidam, wish to finish our lives peacefully and prepare a brighter future for our children. We wish they could have at least one moment of happiness no matter how brief when they can know the meaning of the word 'peace' and finally that they can grow up and live in 'freedom.'"

The people of Iowa under the leadership of former Governor Robert D. Ray, heard the Thaidam cries, prayers and hopes and opened their state, their cities and their hearts to this unfortunate group of people.

In November 1975, Quy Baccam and the first group of Thaidam arrived in Iowa. The city of Des Moines was later called the "free capital of the Thaidam people."

Today in 1998, more than 95% percent of the Thaidam in the United States (2800 people) live in Iowa counties and cities.

### **Background**

The Thaidam belong to the Tai group that spreads from the Himalayan mountains to Burma, Thailand, Laos, the southern part of China, and North Vietnam. According to the genealogical books and written records by the Thaidam "Ong Mo," spiritual man, such books as the "Tay Pu Xeuk," The Expeditionary Road of the Tai, and the "Quam To Muong," Story of the Land, toward the first millennium B.C., The Tai settled in areas spreading from the Southwest of the Chinese province of Yunnan to the valleys of the Red and Black Rivers. Their last unified kingdom was the Kingdom of Nan Chao (619-1283) which was destroyed by the Mongols under Kubilai Khan. The invasion of the Mongols

caused the Tai people to move south of the current Chinese border. The Tai divided themselves into groups. One group went to Laos and became the Laotian. Another group followed the Menam river to Thailand. The Thaidam followed the Black River to North Vietnam and built their town and cities there.

The birthplace of the Thaidam of Iowa is in the Sip Song Chou Thai or the twelve Thai principalities, later called the Thai Federation. In general we can distinguish three groups of Thai: Thaidam (black Thai), Thai Deng (red Thai) and Thai Khao (white Thai), differentiating themselves by the regions they live in. These Thai live in the province of Sonla, Nghia Lo, Lai Chau, Hoa Binh and Thanh Hoa of today's North Vietnam. Thai country is also populated by many ethnic minorities with different languages and cultures such as the Hmong (Meo), Lu, Nung, Lolo, Xa, Nhang, Han, Viet, Yao and Lao.

The Thai country in northwest Tonkin, is bordered on the North by China, on the East by the Red River, on the West by Laos, and on the South by the Vietnamese province of Hoa Binh. It is a country of mountains and valleys with many streams and small rivers which provide the Black and Red Rivers that feed the Tonkin Delta. It covers 50,000 square kilometers of uneven relief- mountainous regions which result in a picturesque landscape of terrace rice fields, often steep slopes skirting more than 100 valleys.

Politically the Thaidam country was located in a strategic location where trade, violent conflicts and combat for power and conquest had constantly occurred between the Mekong kingdoms (Laos and Thailand), the kingdom of Vietnam, the emperor of China, local Thaidam lords and later the French colonialists and Vietnamese communists.

However, no external power had ever maintained more than a temporary or tenuous presence in the upland nor effected complete destruction of the indigenous political and social institutions until the arrival of the communist Vietnamese in 1954.

## **Education**

### Educational issues Facing Thaidam Community

1. Education in the homeland: In the past, Thaidam identity, language, alphabet scripts and culture were preserved from parents to children. The youngsters learned through love songs, rich proverbs, poems, legends and letters of familial communication. Formal schooling was not offered until the 1900s. However, for the Thaidam, like other Indochinese, the whole village or all the adults had the shared responsibility to educate and raise a child.

During the 1900s, the French school system was initiated. Under this new educational system, the teachers had the authority to physically punish students. It was common knowledge that some local lords loved their children so much that they were willing to pay their servants to go to school for their children. This was to prevent the beating of their children.

In April 1947, the romanization of the Thaidam language was prepared by Mr. Francois Martini under the direction of the French High Commission. But the romanized alphabet was not extensively used and accepted by the majority of the Thaidam population.

The Thaidam, who had to move from one country to another, gradually accepted the fact that formal education was the key to equality and a good life. People with formal education had always been highly respected. The parents began to entrust their children too the school personnel to do all they could to educate their children for a better future.

### **Conflict Resolutions**

#### 1. Thaidam strategies to deal with conflicts:

a. In the old country, collective active strategies of resource-pooling and a general support network based on tightly knit extended family organizations were well developed in the Thaidam society. The head of the household decided family affairs. The advice of the elders of the clan and other leaders was sought for major decision-making.

b. In this country, the elders and the leaders of the clan are faced with the limited knowledge of the customs, resources and services which limit their ability to give proper advice. Collective active strategies of resource pooling and support networking need to be extended to persons outside the knit extended family.

c. Thaidam were not afraid to fight for their freedom and their rights. However, given the opportunity, they tried to avoid conflicts or they sought peaceful solutions through mediation and other means. Friends, leaders, advisors, counselors, confidants and others were consulted when conflicts arose. This means of conflict resolution needs to be expanded to Human Service Agencies.

#### 2. Facing the new demands

a. Lack of education: The Thaidam had to move from one country to another, causing the majority of the Thaidam parents to never have the chance to be fully educated. Survival was the name of the game. Only those who were former nobles, or former French soldiers had a few years of education. This lack of education prevents the parents from being able to assist their children with homework and other school requirements;

b. Feeling of "otherness": In the United States of America, many believe that no matter how integrated they become, they don't think that they are considered bona-fide Americans because of an "otherness" factor based entirely on race and circumstances;

c. Limited English Proficiency: Even though some Thaidam parents have been in this country more than 20 years, their handling of the English language and culture are not at the proficiency level. Thaidam parents have to provide for their families. They have to work hard to put food on the table. And their association with native-English-speaking Americans is very limited;

d. Change of society and lack of support: The dramatic change in the family's educational, social, economical and emotional situation from an agricultural society to an industrial society, affect the Thaidam society and families tremendously.

The elders, the head of the household, the parents and the traditional support services have been somewhat shaken, broken and even eliminated by the new demands of the new society. Thaidam parents, leaders and community need to seek ways to face these new challenges. They need to combine the "old way" with the "new way" to combat the new demands facing their children and their communities.

Even though faced with overwhelming demands and barriers, Thaidam parents still have very high hopes for the future of their children. They expect the school to provide their children with the best education in the best environment with the best strategies and equipment. Thaidam parents believe that they deserve the same respect and services as any other parents.

### **Conclusion**

For the Thaidam, Iowa is the "promised" land, the land of freedom, of opportunity, of equality, of education for their children and a base for helping other Tai Dam in need somewhere far away in S.E. Asia, once called the Tai Country.

The Thaidam are diligent and hard-working, but they do not believe in work for work's sake. They prefer to make a job lighter by good company where people can talk and work together. Work where the community pitches in together is work they enjoy and although they may be timid at first, they will soon be eager to join other Americans at work and play. The Thaidam are lucky to be moving to Iowa and Iowa is sure to be rewarded by the devotion and good humor of the Thaidam.

Most Tai Dam own houses, pay taxes, hold steady jobs and are self-sufficient. Tai Dam leaders join volunteer groups and commissions. They also form their own organizations of self-help groups with linkage all over the states and abroad.

Tai Dam enjoy living in Iowa. Even though the Iowa winter is the number one complaint, the freshness of the spring, the joy of the summer and fall activities satisfy these easy going people. The easy neighborly, loving Iowans who accepted the Tai Dam as friends and neighbors with open arms and open heart are also factors for the Tai Dam to stay resettled in Iowa. Taidam are really lucky to be here in Iowa.

However, with all good stories a sad side has to also be told even if it is only a minor occurrence. Tai Dam are encountering problems: Tai Dam are not foreign to discrimination and they are not surprised to see some traces of discrimination and prejudice in this country. Racism, the ambivalence of assimilation, the perils of prosperity, ethnic jealousies, and dire inequities of a laissez faire society are reality in their pursuit of happiness. But they have learned to live with it. It is just another day in another world.

Even though most young people finish high school and attend colleges and universities, some have started to show signs of identity crises, depression, and low self-esteem. For the elderly their lives seem to end: they don't speak English, they don't know the American culture, they cannot drive, they cannot go anywhere on their own, they are isolated in a corner of a house or apartment with no way out. Their dreams are full of suffering and nostalgia. They have nothing to live for but just live for the sake of tomorrow. They cannot guide and control their children and grandchildren anymore. Tai Dam in this country start to slowly lose their identity, language and rich culture.

It is a hope that their children will retain and remember the pride of being a Tai Dam: of being courteous, industrious, easy going, hard-working, persistent, respectful to elders and authority, humorous, hospitable, of giving high esteem to educated people, and of believing strongly in the "higher being" that always protected and guided them throughout their history. It is also a wish that their elders can find peace and happiness in the freshness of the day, in the joy of the morning sun, in the thrill of their offsprings' successes and accomplishments, in the relief of finding the "promised land" of freedom, opportunity, and equality for its people and in the love and warmth of Iowans and fellow Americans.

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## **Indochinese Refugees ARCHIVES**

A Summary of Manuscript and Audiovisual Holdings - Prepared by Geir Gundersen

The holdings of the Gerald R. Ford Library contain a variety of materials on the evacuation and resettlement of over 130,000 Indochinese refugees immediately following the fall of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

What manuscript materials are available for research?

The open collections consist primarily of staff files created in the Ford White House from August 9, 1974 through January 20, 1977. The materials include memoranda, status reports, legislation, and background information pertaining to the evacuation and nearly every phase of the relocation program.

The materials on the relocation of the refugees are substantial and provide a nearly comprehensive overview of the resettlement program. There is extensive information on the efforts undertaken by the White House, Congress, and the Federal agencies to handle the large influx of refugees. Materials document the activities of the refugee camps on Guam and Wake Island and in the United States, the Interagency Task Force on Indochina Refugees, the President's Advisory Committee on Refugees, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The files provide information on the relocation facilities, statistics on the refugees, and the major players within the relocation program. In addition, there is material on the orphan evacuation program, including the Indochina Refugee Children Assistance Act of 1975; voluntary agencies and sponsorships; congressional support; the Refugee Assistance Act of 1975; and efforts by a small group of refugees to return to Vietnam.