

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

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WAT THAM KRABOK, Thailand – They are the leftover people. True believers, they stayed behind in Thailand when their sisters, brothers, children and cousins left for America, clinging to the hope that they could one day liberate their native Laos from the communists.

Kai Yang knows that hope has died. But a new hope has replaced it:

He and 16,000 other Hmong squatters are getting one last chance to rejoin their relatives in America, to start fresh.

Every night after dinner, Yang calls his children and their cousins to the blackboard nailed to the wall of his bamboo hut. He chalks out English phrases they will need to know when they arrive in Sacramento and other U.S. cities later this year.

"America is freedom," the self-described ex-freedom fighter tells them again and again.

As Yang surveys the children shifting restlessly on his dirt floor, he does not see the offspring of poverty and despair. He sees a pilot, an engineer, a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer and - if all goes according to plan - a U.S. senator.

They and their parents, like thousands of Hmong, have long been holed up in this stifling shantytown in the shadow of a Buddhist temple - some for the full 12 years since the closure of Ban Vinai, the last official Hmong refugee camp in Thailand. Their home is a flimsy collection of 2,000 bamboo, metal and concrete shacks with no running water or sewer system. Less than half the families can afford electricity, and shoes and meat are as scarce as jobs.

Because the temple village is not a government-sanctioned camp, there are no handouts for these former mountain farmers. The Hmong must pay Thai merchants for every drop of water, every grain of rice. Half the camp's 8,000 children under age 15 don't go to school because their parents can't afford the \$12 annual tuition.

Thai government officials consider the squatters illegal immigrants and have been trying to get rid of them for years. In December, the U.S. State Department, under pressure from U.S. Hmong activists, agreed to take them to America - a destination that has offered both opportunity and tragedy to the 130,000 Hmong refugees who came before them. In June, the first family to leave the camp arrived in Sacramento.

The Hmong of Wat Tham Krabok will no longer be the missing threads of the Hmong diaspora, a 45-year tapestry of war, escape and internment, of loss of home and family - and the search to recover both.

Though most now yearn for America, their desire is tempered by guilt and anxiety. About 20,000 Hmong who left this shantytown in recent years for other parts of Thailand likely will be left behind because the State Department will take only Hmong living in the temple camp.

By resettling those in Wat Tham Krabok, America is settling a long-overdue debt. The Hmong there are the forgotten remnants of the Vietnam War, the families of Hmong

veterans recruited by the CIA in the 1960s to fight a secret war against the communists in Laos.

That war claimed an estimated 100,000 Hmong lives and drove survivors from their Laotian mountain villages into Thai refugee camps. Most eventually went to America, but some stubbornly waited for Gen. Vang Pao, their leader during the secret war, to return from Orange County to help them liberate their homeland.

These holdouts, and their children, wound up at Wat Tham Krabok. By year's end about 2,000 of them will be among Sacramento's newest residents.

They are grown children who wouldn't go to America without parents too sick or too afraid to go. Some are former opium addicts, or men with multiple wives who refused to comply with U.S. laws against polygamy.

And they are former anti-communist guerrillas like Yang, 47, a Hmong rebel commander who plans to trade the two-room hut he built of bamboo and concrete for his family of 14 for an air-conditioned, three-bedroom home in Sacramento with a stove, refrigerator and washer.

He's chosen Sacramento because his wife's first cousin, May Ying Ly, runs the Hmong Women's Heritage Association, a nonprofit agency that's helping the temple refugees.

Many of these future neighbors have never seen a dentist or a teacher. They don't know how to find an apartment or sign a lease.

Those younger than 30, and most of them are, have spent their entire lives in refugee camps. They have filled their days stitching Hmong pa ndao traditional embroidery, hauling water, doing menial jobs for pennies an hour and doing nothing. Few own televisions, and even fewer know how to read.

"They don't know how to prepare for life in the future," said Yang, one of the rare Hmong in the temple camp who speak English. "The only thing they know how to do is get married."

Help from U.S. relatives Yang is a respected leader here. He says he recruited 1,000 anti-communist rebels to fight for freedom in Laos long after the Vietnam War ended. He is a powerfully built man who knows how to keep his emotions in check. But he's worried about how he'll fare in America.

As he maps out the night's English lesson on the blackboard in fluid cursive, he asks a reporter, "Will a man like me be able to deliver newspapers?"

To help the new refugees, the U.S. government expects to spend \$250 million on food, clothes, housing, English classes, job training and medical care.

Still, the new Hmong will cost taxpayers less than their predecessors. State welfare programs are less generous now, and these arrivals can count on established U.S. Hmong organizations and relatives to help them get started. Nearly all of the 16,000 refugees going to America from Wat Tham Krabok are being sponsored by family members.

"The first-comers were like blindfolded," said Num Pao Fang, president of Sacramento Lao Family Community. "People didn't know they existed. This group will have more helping hands."

Achieving independence in the United States will be a challenge. Roy Kim, Sacramento County's refugee coordinator, said the refugees will need about 400 affordable homes or apartments, which already are in short supply. For less than \$1,000 a month, it's nearly impossible to find a roach-free, three-bedroom home with toilets that work, he said.

And Kim wonders who will drive the newcomers to school, how they'll communicate in a crisis. "What if they burn furniture in a fireplace to keep warm, or leave the stove on and fall asleep and there's a fire? Or neighbors knock on your door and ask you to keep it down and you don't know what they're saying, and the next thing you know, there's a police officer at your door?"

The needs of the new Hmong arrivals will strain the often-meager resources of their cousins in America, many of whom are still trying to master English and find decent jobs.

Nao Tua Vang, a Sacramento Department of Motor Vehicles worker who at one point was anticipating 50 relatives, said, "It's hard right now because I don't have the money to do everything for them."

Dozens of Hmong in Sacramento have agreed to sponsor 10 or more relatives, yet those interviewed spoke not of the hassle, but of mending families torn by war and diaspora. Family bonds were never completely severed because kinship is sacred to the Hmong, who consider first cousins their brothers and sisters.

Ties to America - and fears Nearly every Hmong American has relatives in the temple village, where signs of Americana are abundant.

A teenage girl sews pa ndao while listening to music on a Walkman. A Hmong elder in a beret blows a bittersweet song on his bamboo flute while on a nearby TV, American rocker Debbie Harry sings "Call me! Call me, call me anytime."

At dusk, about 100 Hmong rock to 90 minutes of Jazzercise in the village square.

On the camp's busy Market Street, three widows who run the herbal medicine shops turn giddy when their radio - tuned to a Minnesota Hmong station - confirms they will be going to the United States to be with grandchildren they've never held or kissed.

One of them, Soua Vang, 62, pulls out her most valuable possession: a black book no bigger than a postage stamp that contains phone numbers of her son in Sacramento and her daughter in Stockton. "I survive here just because my daughter and son provide for me," she says.

Despite the poverty in the camp, cell phones are extremely cheap in Thailand, and nearly every family has one to communicate with relatives in the United States.

But as tied as they already are to America, many older Hmong remain terrified of making the trip to rejoin their families. Stories have reached the camp about Hmong American refugees who killed themselves and their children to be reunited with their ancestor spirits, believing that any place was better than living poor and powerless in America.

There are tales of young, healthy Hmong men who went to sleep in their homes in Sacramento, Chicago and other American cities - and never woke up. The mysterious affliction, dubbed "Nightmare Death Syndrome," claimed more than 100 Hmong in the

1980s. Doctors speculated that extreme culture shock coupled with guilt over leaving loved ones behind triggered the fatal nightmares.

Until Vietnam fell in 1975, most Hmong had lived a 17th-century lifestyle in the mountains of Laos, without cars, electricity or schools. They worshipped their ancestor spirits and passed on their 5,000-year history by word of mouth, having no written language until missionaries helped craft one in the 1950s.

Hmong Americans have struggled heroically to make up four centuries in a few decades.

Progress has been made. The median family income for Hmong Americans was \$32,076 in 2000, more than doubling in a decade, according to the U.S. census. Less than a third receive public assistance, compared with two-thirds a decade earlier.

In Sacramento, now home to 25,000 Hmong, refugee children have blossomed into school principals and doctors.

But more than a third of America's Hmong remain trapped in poverty, unable to master English, hold down jobs or communicate with their Americanized children. Thousands of Hmong American youths are earning advanced degrees, but others, enrolled in gangs, have taken bullets instead of SATs.

In the Sacramento City Unified School District, just 15 percent of the 5,000 Hmong children read at grade level.

While some police fear hundreds of illiterate teens will quickly fall into Hmong American gangs, Hmong leaders like their chances in America far better than in the Thai camp.

A magnet for refugees Wat Tham Krabok, a sea of thin metal roofs surrounded by cliffs, looks like the abandoned set of an Indiana Jones movie. It is guarded by 25 giant Buddhas cast from lava rock, a five-story statue of the king of Thailand and 100 Thai soldiers.

In April 2003, the temple became a virtual internment camp after the Thai military moved in and ringed it with razor wire. Now the soldiers control who comes and goes, and everyone must be back by a 6 p.m. curfew.

Life is tense. Guards in camouflage fatigues monitor every conversation between Hmong and outsiders. A few guards speak Lao and Hmong, and Hmong veterans suspect they're spies for the Lao communists.

There are other hardships, too. Nearly every day, Thai miners blast the surrounding limestone hills for road rubble, and a sound like rolling thunder rumbles through the camp.

During the March dry season, the sun bakes the village to 106 degrees, and the air is so dusty your mouth constantly tastes of chalk. June rains turn the streets into rivers of mud, spreading allergies, hepatitis and diarrhea.

But worse than the oppression, heat and filth is the lack of opportunity.

The primary source of income is pa ndao embroidery to be sold in America - even men do the needlework, traditionally the domain of Hmong women. Some Hmong work as day laborers in nearby fields, or in construction. But they earn just \$2.50 a day - the cost of a chicken - and only on the days Thai soldiers let them out. Nearly all depend on money and

gifts from their relatives in America.

From the Thai government's perspective, the Hmong squatters are a problem that should have been solved long ago.

In 1992, when the Ban Vinai refugee camp closed, the remaining Hmong were given a choice: Go to America, or give up your refugee status and be repatriated to Laos.

But about 2,000 Hmong war veterans took a third path, bringing their families to the temple, widely known among the Hmong as an opium treatment center run by a benevolent monk, Abbot Phra Chamroon Pan-chand.

By the time Chamroon died in 1999, the temple camp's population had swelled to a high of 40,000, and the camp had gained a reputation as a haven for drug dealers, smugglers and anti-communist insurgents.

Chamroon had shielded the Hmong from Thai authorities, but once he was gone the Thai government began to look for ways to move them out.

In April 2003, the Thai military moved in, looking for drug dealers. That sweep resulted in the death of a suspected dealer. The Thai commander says he committed suicide; many Hmong believe he was killed for having ties to the Hmong rebels in Laos.

Then, the soldiers began registering the Hmong. Many were afraid to sign up; hundreds fled the camp. Last September, their worst fears were realized: The Thai government has confirmed it was negotiating to send them back to their enemies, the Lao communists.

But in December 2003, under pressure from Hmong American activists and politicians representing Hmong neighborhoods, the State Department announced the United States would take every Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok who passed a drug test and a health screening - as long as they were on the Thai list.

Camp awash in kids Of the 16,000 Hmong on the list, half are under age 15, with more being born every day.

Children, often naked, are everywhere. They are sleeping in hammocks, riding the handlebars of their parents' motorbikes, being chased by mothers with green switches, playing near the foul streams of wastewater that flow through the streets.

Three little boys dunk themselves in a 50-gallon drum filled with brown water and cement mix, while their older brothers play checkers with beer bottle caps. Six girls play jacks with stones in the shade of an empty cistern.

By the time they turn 10, most girls will spend long days sewing shiny coins, beads and embroidery on Hmong New Year's dresses and other traditional clothes to be shipped to America for sale.

Bao Thao, a shy 11-year-old, learns to sew while she baby-sits her four younger brothers and sisters. Like 4,000 other children here under 15, she has never been to school. On this sweltering afternoon, she hides behind a swarm of kids in the doorway of her hut and whispers, "I'm scared to go to school. The teacher might beat me up."

Only about 600 children attend the camp's crowded two-story schoolhouse, which goes

through second grade. "We ask \$1.25 per month per child," said Vice Principal Chai Thao, "but a lot are too poor to pay."

Bao Thao's father earns less than \$25 a month as a day laborer; the Thai soldiers have not let him out today to find work. "I can only afford to send my oldest son to school," he says sadly. "We hope all of us will be able to go to school in America."

Older children, like Kai Yang's 11-year-old daughter, Mai Nhia Yang, are supposed to go to the Thai school outside the camp. But the little girl in the dirty orange Beckham soccer shirt refuses. As she hangs around her family's hut, she says that when she went, classmates hit her and the Thai teacher didn't do anything about it.

"I'd like to be a teacher," she says, "so I can teach people not to hate each other and not box with each other."

Different centuries

Every night from 8 to 10, Mai Nhia and a dozen other kids attend her dad's English class. And every night the star of the class is Kai Yang's vivacious 13-year-old daughter, Xue, whose ambitions transcend the camp.

"I'd like to be a doctor - I'll try my best," Xue says. She'd also like to take piano lessons in Sacramento with her second cousin, Mercedes Ly, 14.

Ly, who grew up in California, is one of the stars of her class, too. She's a freshman in Kennedy High School's criminal justice academy.

The cousins live in different centuries.

On a spring morning in the camp, Xue gets up at 6 a.m., goes to the outhouse, washes with cistern water and combs her fine hair in a small mirror hanging outside her hut.

She usually cooks rice for breakfast, but today is a good day: She's cleaning a fish from the camp market and frying it over an open flame. "She cooks everything," her mother says with pride.

Xue washes the dishes with cistern water, cleans house, wheels home 100 gallons of water from the tanker trucks parked half a mile away, then watches Thai soap operas on TV.

"I wish I had a favorite book, but I don't yet," she says. There's no library in the camp.

On another spring morning - this one in Sacramento - Xue's cousin Mercedes awakens at 6:30, takes a hot shower in her own bathroom in her four-bedroom home, then dons her police blues, every crease perfect, black boots spit-shined. She hustles downstairs to dine on a breakfast of sausage and ribs cooked by her dad, then catches a ride with her mom to school.

There, she hits the ground to do 50 push-ups in her first-period Law and Equity class.

After school, she takes a 10-minute bus ride home, where she looks after her younger brother, waters the flowers and then gets on her Viewsonic PC. She signs in as "Mooshu" - the name of the dragon in the movie "Mulan" - and instant-messages her friends about her day.

Her favorite book, one of hundreds she has borrowed from the public library, is "A Walk to Remember," about a teenage girl, stricken with leukemia, who falls for a "bad boy" she's counseling.

Ask her about her plans for the future and she pauses for a minute. "There are many things I'd like to be," she says. "A psychologist, a basketball player."

She and other Hmong teens are doing their part to help the newcomers, collecting used clothes from classmates.

Mercedes says her family is ready to share beds, couches, a bathroom and a kitchen with a houseful of newly arrived relatives, too. But, she wonders, "How are they going to get used to it and how long is it going to take?"

Parent's resolve Kai Yang doesn't want to be a burden to Mercedes and her family, which is why he pushes his children so hard to learn English out of the old textbook he saved from the shuttered camp in northeast Thailand, Ban Vinai.

He left Ban Vinai in 1984 to return to Laos and join the anti-communist rebels. Now he regrets that decision.

"If I went to the U.S. in 1984 I should have a good job and my baby (would) have studied in high school and in college," Yang said. "I think it's too late for me."

In the morning light, Yang sat outside his hut at a small table, tooling an intricate silver necklace that relatives will sell for him in America for \$250, which pays his electric bill.

A few feet away, pa ndao whizzed back and forth under the presser foot of his wife's black and gold Flying Man brand sewing machine.

"I've used it for 10 years, nonstop - I get bored, but there's nothing else for me to do," she said. She won't go to Sacramento without it.

When Yang gets to Sacramento, he's thinking about opening a Hmong restaurant. If not, he said, "I can be a farmer - I've farmed corn, rice, cucumber."

But he has loftier dreams for his children.

He'd like one to become a senator and another a lawyer so they can resolve disputes American-style. "In this camp," he said, "if a couple has a problem, I, as a clan leader, have to solve it. ... I must decide what is true.

"In the United States, you can go to the university and get a master's degree, but in Thailand they say we are not legal," Yang said, looking up from his necklace. "We have some Hmong who go to high school, but they must register under a Thai name."

Yang is an avid student of American history and politics. His family has gone many meals without meat, nourished instead by an old TV "to listen to the news, so I can watch how legal things in the United States go up and down," he said. "Everybody should know what the government does, what the leaders do."

Tension between old, new Yang has come to realize an education, not an AK-47, will liberate

his children in America.

He, like many in the camp, now embraces American culture. But others swear by the old ways, clinging to tattered dreams of their glory days in Laos.

The tension between past and future plays out in nearly every family here: The male elders were the least willing to go to America, but their adult children have long been aching to go. As a result, many resent their parents.

"We begged them many times to leave," said Ma Lee, as he drove to the temple in a truck paid for by his sister in Fresno.

Lee has spent 25 of his 28 years in the camps. When Ban Vinai closed, he and his young wife were ready to go to Fresno, too. "And then our parents cried day and night, 'We don't want to go,' " he said. "You could see their tears streaming down. In our religion it's sinful to see your parents cry."

But there wasn't enough farm work around the camp, and "I started to complain," he said. "I'm a man, I'm not supposed to be sewing pa ndao."

Lee would rather stitch up patients. "My dream is to become a doctor," said the son of shamans, the Hmong spirit healers. "I really care about people and I'm not scared of touching sick people." With only a fourth-grade education, he wonders, "How will I ever get my medical degree?"

Some sons weren't stopped by their parents' tears.

Wang Thao went to Sacramento 16 years ago with his wife and kids, leaving behind his father, a shaman and clan leader.

"My dad was very angry," he said, speaking over the thump of an overloaded washer inside the West Sacramento Laundromat he owns. His wife teaches kindergarten.

Wang Thao can't wait to prove to his dad that coming to America is the right decision.

"I got a five-bedroom house," said Thao, 44. "One room is waiting for him."

Inside the camp, his dad, Soua Leng Thao, 74, sells cold drinks from a cooler in his tiny general store. He's lucky to make \$2 a day. He's worried he'll have to lean too heavily on his son in Sacramento, "but there's no way for me to stay here anymore."

To survive in America, many Hmong elders figure they need all the help they can get - including help from the spirit world.

Along a dirt alley, Zong Rou Yang's children clean two sacrificial pigs while, inside Yang's hut, a shaman summons the ghosts of Yang's ancestors.

The shaman's singsong chanting, accompanied by the relentless banging of a gong, spills out onto the surrounding streets. The hut fills with the smell of incense and burning paper, representing a cash offering.

"We want our ancestors' blessing when we come to Sacramento," says Zong Rou Yang, 67. "We want to get all the spirits together and not leave anybody behind."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo

Every night after dinner at the stifling squatters camp outside the Wat Tham Krabok temple in Thailand, Kai Yang, background, tries to prepare his children, including son Tong Yang, 9, foreground, for their future in Sacramento. Yang, who fought the communists in Laos, writes on a chalkboard English phrases he thinks will be useful in America.

Statues of the Thai king and Buddhist figures guard the Wat Tham Krabok temple, which looms over the squatters camp. Some 16,000 people registered in the camp will be coming to America. Another 20,000 who have left the camp likely will be left behind.

The busy market at Wat Tham Krabok serves the camp's 16,000 residents. The camp is not government-sanctioned, so residents must pay for all their water and food.

A mother cares for her baby at the squatters camp as a neighbor washes himself. The camp lacks running water and sewers; a visiting truck supplies drinking water.

Kai Yang hopes to trade the two-room hut he built of bamboo and concrete for his family of 14, at left, for an air-conditioned, three-bedroom home in Sacramento with a stove, refrigerator and washer. The squatters camp consists of 2,000 such shacks with no running water or sewer system.

Kai Yang works on a white silver necklace - which will be sold in the United States for \$250 - while his wife, Mai Shoua Vang, makes traditional Hmong embroidery on a Chinese sewing machine that she intends to bring with her to Sacramento.

Kai Yang, sitting at left, the former anti-communist fighter, has chosen to bring his family to Sacramento because his pregnant wife, Mai Shoua Vang - above with daughter Mai Kou Yang, 3, and at near left - has a first cousin here. The cousin, May Ying Ly, runs the Hmong Women's Heritage Association, a nonprofit agency that's helping the Wat Tham Krabok refugees. Yang, who is one of the few Hmong in the squatters camp who speaks English, often tells his kids that "America is freedom," though he worries about how he'll fare in the United States.

Children head home after a day at the camp's crowded two-story school, which goes only through the second grade. Of the camp's 8,000 residents under age 15, half don't attend any school in the area.

The Wat Tham Krabok camp is full of sights like these, with children riding on their parents' motorbikes. By the time they are 10, most girls will spend long days sewing coins, beads and embroidery on Hmong New Year's dresses to be shipped to America for sale.

Three boys seek refuge from heat that reaches 106 degrees in March by dunking themselves in a 50-gallon drum filled with brown water and cement mix. Kids, often naked, are everywhere. Half of the camp's 16,000 dwellers are under age 15. At left, a child plays near one of the streams of wastewater that flow through the crowded camp's streets.

Lives in different centuries Xue Yang and Mercedes Ly live half a world apart, both literally and figuratively. Xue subsists in the primitive conditions of the squatters camp at Wat Tham Krabok, while Mercedes has grown up as a modern teenager in California.

THAILAND: Xue Yang, 13 Xue Yang arises at 6 a.m. to wash herself with cistern water, left, then cooks fish for breakfast while sister Mai Nhia, 11, watches. The fish is a welcome break from the standard diet of rice.

Xue Yang scales a fish from the market outside her shack at Wat Tham Krabok. Xue's mother, Mai Shoua Vang, left, is pregnant with her 11th child.

SACRAMENTO: Mercedes Ly, 14 Dressed in her police blues, Mercedes Ly, a freshman in the criminal justice academy at Kennedy High School in Sacramento, prepares to leave her four-bedroom home after a breakfast of sausage and ribs cooked by her father. Her mother will drive her to school.

Mercedes Ly, above center, jokes with other Kennedy High students, and plays a video game with brother Ntuj Tshiab (whose name means "new world"), at right. Despite their different lives, Xue Yang and Mercedes Ly see a future full of possibilities. Xue wants to be a doctor, after coming to Sacramento. Mercedes says, "There are many things I'd like to be."

Tsoua Cha, above, holds her 8-month-old child, Pa Yang, outside the hut of her father-in-law, Zong Rou Yang, at the squatters camp during a spirit ceremony, in which two pigs will be sacrificed. At left, shaman Nou Yang summons the ghosts of Zong Rou Yang's ancestors as the hut fills with the smell of incense and burning paper. "We want our ancestors' blessing when we come to Sacramento," says Zong Rou Yang.

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen (map) Wat Tham Krabok

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen (chart) History of the temple Hmong

1960: CIA appoints Vang Pao to draft 9,000 Hmong tribesmen into a secret anti-communist army in Laos.

1965-1973: U.S. launches secret air war in Laos, aided by Hmong pilots and spotters.

1975: Vietnam War ends; communist Pathet Lao declare they will wipe out the Hmong resistance. First Hmong refugees arrive in U.S.

1975-1986: More than 130,000 Hmong flee Laos for Thai refugee camps. At least another 30,000 die in communist ambushes or drown while crossing the Mekong River.

1992: Ban Vinai - largest of the officially sanctioned refugee camps in Thailand - closes. Some 2,000 Hmong warriors and their families take sanctuary at Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple north of Bangkok.

1999: Hmong squatters village at the temple grows to about 40,000; the abbot who protected the Hmong dies, and the Thai government tries to move the Hmong to remote villages in Thailand - or back to Laos.

April-August 2003: Thai soldiers take over the Hmong squatters village, round up suspected drug dealers and control who goes in and out. They register the 16,000 Hmong living there.

December 2003: The U.S. State Department announces it will resettle the 16,000 Hmong temple-dwellers who signed the Thai military's list.

June 2004: The first Hmong family from Wat Tham Krabok arrives in Sacramento. About 2,000 more expected here by December.

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