



Background Information:

Hmong - an ethnic group from the mountainous regions of China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Hmong groups began a southward migration in the 18th Century due to political unrest and to find arable land to farm.

After the Vietnam War and the withdrawal of American forces after 1973, 100,000 Hmong fled Lao because they were being treated badly and killed by the Communists. They journeyed through jungle and across the Mekong to Thailand. Tens of thousands died on the journey.

In Thailand they lived in refugee camps and because they had no writing skills, the women embroidered their

story. 1600 Hmong people migrated to Australia and are now scattered across the nation. The word Hmong means freedom. Today they struggle to keep their cultural traditions alive and their traditional costumes with intricate, hand woven embroidery have been placed on the cultural heritage list by UNESCO. In Innisfail today there are about 20 Hmong families left.

Kao Vue has been living in Innisfail for 21 years. He is of Hmong ethnicity and is head of the Hmong Council of Australia.

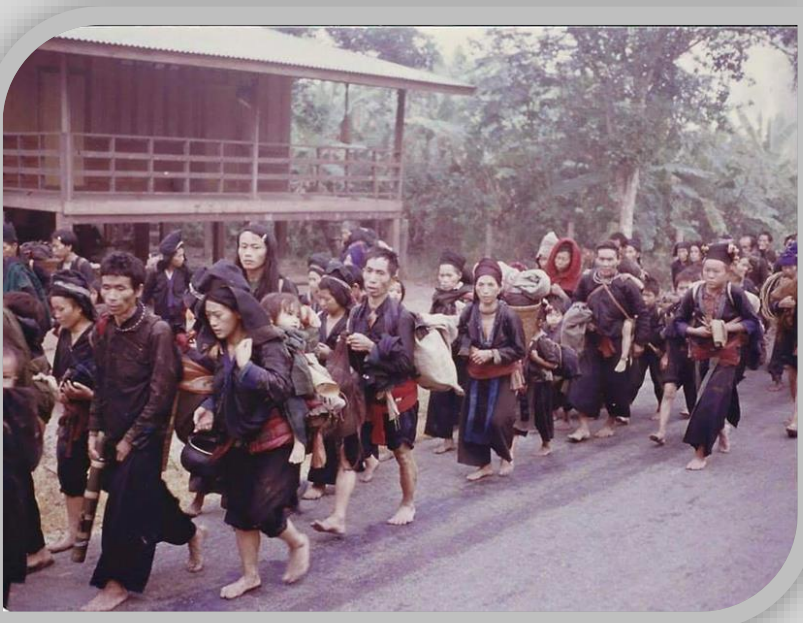
I met with Kao and his wife Se, keen to hear their story of migration to Australia. Though he was worried about his English Kao speaks with fluency and though he is a quiet man his story unfolded over a long and interesting discussion. His story is one of a very difficult life as a refugee and despite the hardship he suffered it was told simply and with humility.

Getting the facts

Kao was born on the 16th of August, 1964, in Sayaboury province in Laos. Life was tough. They grew rice and corn on their land. When he was only six years old Kao's mother died of illness. His father and brothers and sisters had to work on the family farm and there was nobody to take care of little Kao so he was sent to live with his uncle. Kao's mother had given him a handmade shirt and he slept with it under his pillow until he was fourteen or fifteen when it burnt in a fire in the refugee camp in Thailand. Life with his uncle was hard. Now, far from his father's home, Kao only got to see his father twice a year. Kao went to school from the age of eight and studied hard. In the village there was no electricity and Kao had to sit close by the fire in the evenings to do his school work. That was fine in the winter but very hot in the summer months.



Due to the Vietnam War and the unrest in Laos, Kao's uncle, who was a smart man, decided they should cross the Mekong River to be closer to the Thai border. When the communists came, life was too dangerous to stay in their village and they decided to flee. Kao was eleven at the time and saw the planes flying overhead and heard some of the bombing. It



took them five days to walk to the Thai border and cross into Thailand where they were taken to live in a refugee camp named Nam Yao. Life in the camp was difficult. They were given rice and vegetables by the United Nations Organisation and Western organisations helped with sanitation. The camp was fenced so their freedom was restricted and Kao remembers the worst thing was the aggression from the Thai officials. There were teachers in the camp and Kao started learning Thai, French and English. His hope was to migrate to America because they could not go back to Laos and they were not welcome to stay in Thailand. Kao knew that

learning English would be essential in his new life in

America. Between 1975 and 1980 Kao worked in the camp hospital as an interpreter.

Later they were moved to another refugee camp called Bin Vinai. Bin Vinai was the largest refugee camp for both Hmong and Lao people amongst whom there were



some disagreements. It was in this camp that Kao met and married his wife Se. They had two children in the camp, Wai and Drong (both

boys). Kao wanted to migrate to America but he could not find an American sponsor. He decided to write a letter to the Hmong Association in Tasmania and through them he discovered he had a cousin

living in Sydney who sent Kao the application form for migration to Australia. Kao said it was lucky that when he was interviewed by Australian Migration the interpreter, who was his friend, allowed him to speak directly with the migration officer. On the 8th of November, 1988, Kao and his family left Bin Vinai and were moved to a camp in Bangkok where they waited for five months before flying to Australia on the 11th of April in 1989. Kao, Se and the children flew to Sydney to stay with cousin Ge Lee Vue, whom Kao had never met.



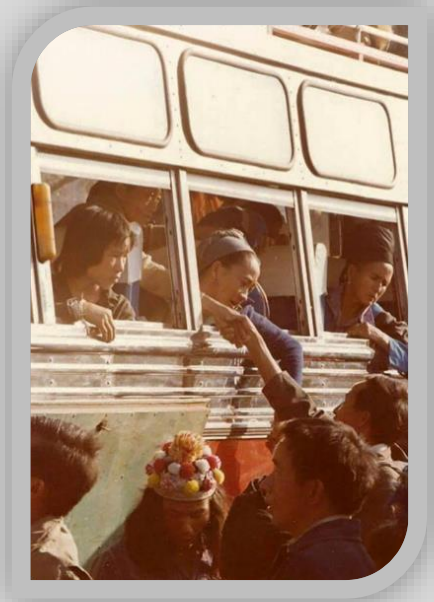


Though very happy to be out of the refugee camp and living in Australia there were some difficulties. Kao remembers being startled by how different it was in this strange, new city where it was easy to get lost on public transport. He had learnt American English in the camps and struggled to understand Australian English. They lived in the Western suburbs of Sydney for a year and in this time their third child Jimmy was born. They then moved to Melbourne where Kao continued his English studies and was employed by the Hmong Australia Society as a welfare worker. It was in

Melbourne that their first daughter, Lucy, was born.

Wai found school difficult as he did not speak English and he would cry at school. Luckily he had a friend who would comfort him. Drong found school easier as he had learnt some English. On the 23rd of October, 1991, Kao was granted Australian citizenship.

Kao's cousin Ge Lee moved to Innisfail and started farming bananas. He was the second Hmong person to settle in Innisfail and begin farming. Five or six years later, on the 29th of July, 1996, Kao and his family also moved to Innisfail to live and work on his cousin's farm. At first Kao found farming difficult as he had never done it before. With time he grew to enjoy farm life and the children liked having chickens. In the year 2000 they bought a house in Belvedere but continued to farm land up at Nerada. They grew bananas, however after Cyclone Larry and Cyclone Yasi decided it would be a good idea to grow underground crops that are protected from winds. As a result they now also farm galangal, turmeric and pandan. Kao and Se now have a fourth son, Drey, who was born in Innisfail.



In his role

as head of the Hmong Council Kao strives to keep Hmong culture alive in the community. He manages the New Year celebration when they dress up in traditional costume. Kao also oversees the weddings and funerals in the Hmong community. According to Kao the hardest thing of all is the funeral song which takes four years to learn and is sung over

the night. Kao sings the song with some assistants to help him. Every Saturday evening the Hmong community still meets. Kao admits it is hard to keep the traditions alive as the younger generation can no longer speak Hmong.

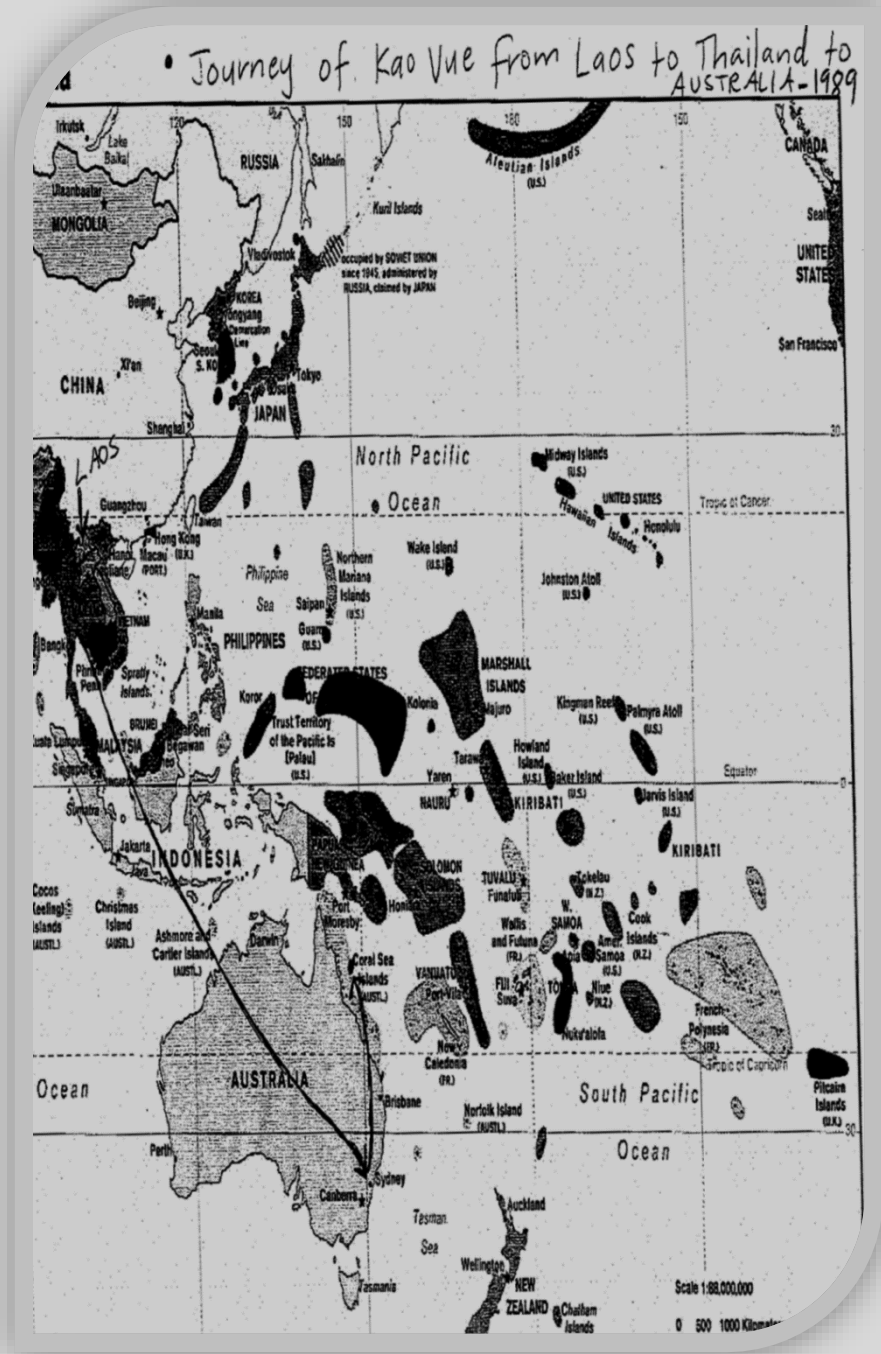
Make a map

Identify a Critical Event

When asked to identify a critical event which had impacted greatly on his life, Kao said, “In the camp we had to make a very hard decision...that was the decision to migrate to Australia”. Kao made that decision because life as a refugee in the camp was very hard and he wanted a better life for his family. Migration to Australia was the critical event which changed Kao’s life completely.

Looking Back

Kao feels fortunate that his uncle was a smart man and made the decision to move to the Thai side of the Mekong River. This allowed them to escape when life became too dangerous to stay in Laos. At the time they were able to travel by boat across the Mekong. If they had attempted that same journey later on they



would not have been able to cross by boat and may have perished. The decision to migrate to Australia was a good one which turned the course of Kao Vue’s and his family’s life. Kao’s ability to learn English so well was instrumental in his successful application to migrate to Australia, to gain work and to achieve the successful life he now leads as a landowner.

Summary of the Interview

- * Kao Vue was born in Sayaboury, Laos in 1964.
- * Kao' s mother died when he was six and he was sent to live with his uncle.
- * Kao' s uncle moved them across the Mekong River to be closer to Thailand.
- * When he was eleven Kao and his uncle' s family walked to Thailand. They were placed in Nam Yao Refugee Camp.
- * Kao studied English in the camp.
- * Between 1975 and 1980 Kao worked in the camp hospital as an interpreter.
- * They were later moved to Bin Vinai Camp where Kao met and married Se. Two boys were born to them.
- * Kao wrote a letter to the Hmong Association in Tasmania and discovered through them that he had a cousin living in Sydney.
- * Kao applied for migration to Australia.
- * On the 8th of November, 1988, Kao and his family left Bin Vinai and were moved to a camp in Bangkok.
- * On the 11th of April in 1989, Kao and his family flew to Sydney. Their third son Jimmy was born in Sydney.
- * Kao and family moved to Melbourne a year later. Kao continued his English studies and was employed as a welfare worker. Their first girl Lucy was born.
- * On the 29th of July, 1996, Kao and his family moved to Innisfail and began a new life as banana farmers with Ge Lee. Drey, their fourth son, was later born.
- * In 2000 they bought a house in Belvedere and continued to farm up at Nerada.
- * Kao is head of the Hmong Council and leads the local Hmong community in traditional practises at New Year, weddings and funerals.



Further Information/Questions

Prior to the interview with Kao I researched the history and culture of the Hmong people and the history of the Vietnam War and the impact on people living in Lao under communism, after the withdrawal of American troops.

I have many questions I would like to ask Kao. In particular I would like to ask him more about the journey he made across the Mekong River into Thailand and the journey he made from Laos into Thailand. I would like to know how difficult that journey was. I would like to know more about the rest of Kao's family and what happened to them. I would also like to know more about Kao's early life in Sydney and Melbourne as new immigrants:

1. How difficult was life as a new migrant in Australia?
2. What were some difficulties that you experienced during that time?
3. Did you miss the family left behind in Thailand and Laos and were you able to make contact with them?
4. What did happen to your father and your siblings?
5. Can you remember some experiences that were particularly hard for yourself or your family?